

Zendou: Duel Hearts

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Category: Halo

Genre: Romance

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2011-07-16 04:43:45

Updated: 2011-10-04 18:31:06

Packaged: 2016-04-27 00:23:53

Rating: M

Chapters: 20

Words: 65,939

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: 5 of 6. Ambassador Zeno 'Ribal is still struggling with his past and haunted by nightmares. Then, he takes pity on a Sangheili that is running away from his own troubles and sets in motion events that changes two lives forever. Last Chap up.

1. Prologue

Authors Note: At least, the next arc in the Zendou storyline has begun. I apologize for the delay, though I imagine many of you understand the pain of writing muses being a PITA. Anyway, this will be updated weekly, unless I manage to finish the last storyline prior to the last chap: I'll bump up the posting schedule to twice a week if that happens *fingers crossed she does not have writers block like that again*. Oh and this one is the longest of the series so far at 20 chapters (which includes this prologue).

For newcomers to the series: reading the previous four Zendou arcs is not required, but it is recommended, so you'd know what went on in Zeno's life prior to this story.

Unfortunately, this one I have to have rankd as mature due to content, specifically: slash pairing, implied rape, abuse and probably a couple other things I am forgetting atm.

Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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><p>Prologue

The room was large and circular, roughly thirty feet in diameter, the walls made of stone which where finely cut: the floor was also

stone, but covered with a layer of dirt and dust. Adorning the walls were torches, evenly spaced in a single row around the room, seven in all, which was barely enough to see in this dim, dank place. Above was a high ceiling from which iron chains of various lengths hung, the top of the ceiling he could not see, for the light did not reach that far. On one end of the room was a heavy, cast iron door, with only a small window from which to see beyond the room. _

He could not see much through this window, but he knew what was beyond this door: freedom. However, the door was locked with a heavy padlock, keeping him from opening the door. On the padlock was a tear shaped symbol, which was obviously the type of key he needed to find. Yet, no matter how hard he searched, he could not find this key, leaving him trapped in this lonely room.

_Then __**it**__ came._

_Oozing through window and the gaps around the edges of the door, came a giant amorphous blob. There was no color to it from what he could see and the torch light glinted off its slimy mass. Long tentacles protruded from this mass, probing and searching for him. He knew what it wanted and he kept as much distance as he could from it. However the blob, once fully in the room, easily took up three-fourths of the floor space, leaving him with little space to go. Indeed there was only one place he __**could**__go: up._

He ducked under one waving tentacle, before leaping upon one of the hanging chains and started to climb. The blob though, somehow sensed where he was going, the tentacles reaching for him. He kicked at one, keeping it from grabbing hold of his leg, but while he was distracted with that tentacle, another grabbed his other leg. It started to pull, trying to drag him down into its slimy mass, yet he found it wasn't that strong and that he could keep his position on the chain easily. However, he could not afford to attempt prying it off, not while other tentacles were seeking to get a grip on him.

So he focused on keeping the rest of him out of its grasp. The problem though, was that this thing didn't seem to tire, while he already was. Eventually, his other leg was seized, followed shortly by his waist. His grip was starting to slip by then and no amount of yelling and struggling improved that. Finally, his grip failed and he was pulled into the main body of the blob. He screamed in terror as he was sucked in, screamed until he was completely within it and the air in his lungs ran out and he started to drownâ€¦|.

Zeno woke up screaming, jolting upright in his bed. Wide-eyed, he looked around to confirm he was in his quarters on the Cairo and not in a medieval dungeon with a cheesy B-movie monster devouring him. _Not againâ€¦|_ he thought, rubbing his eyes. It was the second time this week he had this particular nightmare, a nightmare that had been reoccurring more frequently since he started having it about a year ago. He wished he knew why he kept having it: was the human food he had been eating since his assignment here finally getting to him?

With a sigh, he looked at the time. _Dammit, it is only 1am,_ he grumbled. Way too early for him to be up. Worse, he knew he was likely going to be unable to fall back asleep, not without help that is. Sighing once more, he got up and headed for the small kitchen in his suite, ducking under the too low human sized doorway frames out

of pure instinct. He opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniels and frowned at how much was left: only a forth of a bottle.

Human alcohol did not have nearly as much alcohol content as Sangheilian brews, though Zeno did not drink it to get drunk: just enough to dull his senses so he could sleep again. Hopefully what he had left would be enough to fulfill that purpose, as he certainly did not want to resort to going to one of the human bars on the station. He remembered when he used to do just that, until his friend Luke McGuire advised him that it wasn't good for his image as Sangheili ambassador. Since then he had kept his own stock in his quarters, which he made a mental note to see about refilling after his duties for the day were done.

Zeno downed the contents of the bottle, not bothering with a glass this time. It tasted horrible, as always, but he didn't drink it for the taste after all. After a couple of moments he got the familiar buzz that told him he had enough to help him sleep. Leaving the bottle on the kitchen counter, he returned to his bedroom and collapsed onto the bed. Within moments, he fell into an alcohol induced sleep.

* * *

><p>All he could hear was the soft humming of the ships engines and the occasional muffled announcement on the intercom system that he could never make out. What light there was in this place was dim, barely penetrating the slight opening in the lid of this cargo crate he was in. All he could smell was the musky scent of the agyat hides he had been using as his bed and he had long gotten used to their pungent scent.

How long have I been in here? he asked himself. There was no means of telling how much time had passed since this one way trip started. Only the dryness of his mouth and the hunger pang in his gut told him that he had been in here for some time. At least, some time since the last time he dared to search for sustenance. Sustenance he knew he would need to hunt for again very soon, if he was to survive long enough to see this plan through.

He didn't know if it was the hunger and thirst, the darkness, or the crushing _loneliness_, but he was starting to doubt himself and this plan. A plan born out of desperation: to escape the life that he had, a life where he had no control, no sense of self-worth. It was cowardly to run away, but what choice did he have? Nothing else was working and there was little those that actually gave a damn could do for him. So he was in this crate, going to where ever this supply ship was going. Once there, he hoped to blend in with the local populous and find what he was looking for: a new life, a new purpose.

Himself.

Until then, he had to stay in this crate. He knew that if the was discovered, they would send him back. Send him back to that hell, that pain, in a cycle that never ended. A cycle he so desperately wanted to break, hence why he was here now.

You think you can do anything without me? A voice said in his head,

a memory of what he was trying to escape from. Though the owner of those words was not here, he felt himself curl into a ball of fear regardless. _HA! You are nothing! Nothing without me!_

"Shut up!" He whimpered, holding his head.

You know I am right, you worthless little worm. You know I am the only one that cares a lick about you.

"SHUT UP!"

He froze instantly, all too aware that his outburst may have ruined everything. Nervously he lifted the lid of the crate and stared out into the dimly lit cargo hold, watching and listening for any signs of the ship's crew. Nothing was stirring and after several tense moments he breathed a sigh of relief: he was in the clear.

After putting the lid back down, he curled up once more, this time not out of fear but of desperation. _I will not go back._ He told himself. _I will never go back._

He kept telling himself this, over and over again.

* * *

><p>AN:** I know, short, but prologues usually are no? I promise the rest of the chaps will be longer. :)

2. The Stowaway

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><p>Chapter 1: The Stowaway

It had been a long day.

Zeno 'Ribal entered his quarters with a heavy sigh and gladly started stripping off the ambassador armor he was required to wear for meetings. He hated the armor, primarily due to the white color it was painted in: white clashed badly with his dark skin tone, washing out the details of his face. Zeno had no doubt this fact made it hard for the human dignitaries to read his expressions, which was already difficult for them due to his alien physiology. It could not be helped though, as white was the human's color for peace and one of Zeno's jobs was to keep that peace.

That and negotiating trading arrangements. The Arbiter did most of it during his time as ambassador, but Zeno could see why the Arbiter so eagerly jumped at the chance to dump this job on him at first opportunity: human politicians and businessmen were shrewd individuals. The amount of double talk, misleading terms, and so on was horrible and it took all of Zeno's mental skills to decode it

all. Still, his dealing with human level of politics was now giving him an edge against the Sangheili politicians, which the council was obviously not enjoying at all. The humans enjoyed this immensely, as the humans had little love for the Sangheili High Council ever since the Kesi fiasco.

_Ah, Kesiâ€|, _Zeno thought as he finished stripping down and stepped into the shower. _You caused a lot of things to happen. Some things we never expected to happen._

The change that stuck in his mind the most was the change in his commander, Rtas 'Vadum. In a relatively very short amount of time, Rtas changed from a work-a-holic that usually outright refused to go on any kind of leave, to a man that spent most of his free time checking up on his new mate, Ella. Zeno also learned a lot more about Rtas' past he had never known before: he would have never even guessed that Rtas was once a victim of domestic abuse and that abuse resulted in a phobia of women. No wonder he never went on leave before, though now that phobia has been treated.

Still, Rtas' new family life left Zeno a bit envious, maybe even a bit bitter. Rtas hardly had time for him anymore, not that Rtas had been very approachable in few months preceding his assignment to the Cairo, which was about a year prior to when the Kesi problem was finally resolved. Rtas wasn't the only one to settle down either: the Arbiter had taken on a new mate, a petite female named Sari whom turned out to be Rtas' half-sister! Yes, a lot had come about, but none of it did Zeno himself any good.

He had thought isolating himself here at Earth would help his own pain, but thoughts of Miko still haunted him from time to time. Zeno had hoped the tattoo he got to honor Miko's memory would give him closure: which it did, but only for a short time. On top of the grief that assaulted him and the loneliness that stalked him were the nightmares

Usually, it was the dream about the blob hunting and devouring him, but sometimes he had one that involved the circumstances around Miko's death. In this dream, however, the Flood succeeded in taking over Miko's body and attacked him. Zeno could never bring himself to 'kill' the Miko combat form and eventually he would be killed by it and then become part of the Flood himself.

Regardless of which dream it was, he always woke up screaming and checking to ensure it was just a dream, that he was, indeed, still alone in his room. Afterward he would drink: he knew it wasn't good for him to do so for both his physical and mental health, but it was the only way he knew how to ensure he would fall asleep again. He certainly didn't bother telling anyone about the dreams either, as he was sure he would just be told they meant nothing and that it had to have been something he ate, or watched beforehand. Besides, his Sangheilian pride kept him from seeking out advice on such matters anyway.

All he could do was hope he didn't have either dream again tonightâ€|.

* * *

><p>He was awakened by a sudden jolt. Only just managing to keep

himself from crying out in surprise, he froze. More jolts followed, forcing him to brace himself against the sides of the crate to keep himself from banging against the sides and potentially alerting workers. What was going on?<p>

Once the fog of sleep had mostly passed he was able to concentrate on listening. He heard voices and machinery. Considering the crate was constantly bouncing about now that meant only one thing: the ship had arrived at a port and the workers were now started to unload their cargo. His hearts started hammering with excitement.

I made it!, he thought, joy filling his hearts for the first time in months. _I actually made it!_

Reality set in quickly, dulling his mood but not by much. He had to get out of this crate without being detected first. After that, get his bearings, assume a new identity and find work!.

Then he heard something that puzzled him. While he could hear Sangheilian voices, they were speaking in human, which meant there were humans here. What were humans doing here? This was supposed to be Sangheili colony. Without his armor and thus translator, he could not understand most of the human speech, but he did catch a couple of words he did understand and his hearts sank.

Earth. Cairo.

No, no, no! he thought, starting to panic. _This is all wrong! The ship was not supposed to go to Earth!_

The ship must have had a last minute schedule change, but either way, he was screwed. The people here would send him back for sure. What was he going to do?

Calm down! Calm down!, he told himself, taking deep breaths. _Just sit tight and wait for them to finish unloading and everything to go quiet. Get out and figure things out from there!_.

His crate did finally stop moving after a few moments, but things were taking a long time to go quiet. A couple of dockworkers, both humans he could tell, kept lingering by his crate. He only understood one word out of their conversation: agyat. _Oh blood, they must be taking inventory!_ he thought, panic really setting in now. _Please do not open the crate! please!_.

He would not get his wish.

The moment the lid of the crate lifted, he reacted out of a combination of reflex and sheer panic. He leapt out of the crate, surprising both dockworkers. His landing was less than gracious for one of his species, stumbling and falling onto his face: his legs were a bit rusty after being cooped up in that crate for so long. By the time he got his legs to cooperate, the dockworkers were shouting in alarm. He only had one choice now: run.

"No!" he shouted in his native tongue as he ran as fast as his legs could carry him. "I will not go back! I will not go back to the Shadow!"

* * *

><p>Zeno was just getting ready to go to bed when Sesai, the station's AI, popped up on a console next to his bed. Most human AIs took on a human form, but this one took the form of what the humans referred to as an eastern style dragon. Serpentine body, short three-toed legs, a mane of fur around the head, with a ridge of it going down her back and ending in a tuft, whiskers on her snout and a pair of horns behind her eyes: humans certainly had interesting looking mythological creatures.<p>

"What is up, Sesai?" Zeno asked, pausing in his bedtime preparations.

"I have just received a report of a stowaway on one of the recently arrived supply ships, Ambassador"

Zeno winced faintly. "Sesai, I have asked you to only refer to me as 'Zeno' when I am in my private quarters. Plus, I do not see why you are telling me about a stowaway: that is a matter for the security teams."

"Protocol dictates that you be referred to as 'Ambassador' regardless of your personal tastes, Ambassador." Zeno could hear a bit of cheekiness in the AI's tone, much to his annoyance. "In regards to why I am informing you of this event: have you forgot that you are also responsible for the behavior of any Sangheili that visit this system?"

Zeno sighed as he remembered: yes he was indeed in charge of settling any problems his fellow Sangheili caused. Then he blinked and looked at the AI fully when he caught on to why she reminded him of his fact. "The stowaway is Sangheili?"

"Affirmative, Ambassador."

"That is rather unusual. Even a lowly serf would not even think of doing such a thing. It would be considered dishonorable."

"Regardless, he has yet to be apprehended. Security has him cornered in one of the storage bays. Unfortunately, this particular bay is stocked with items that are quite flammable and volatile, so security is hesitant to rush in."

"Not to mention they likely do not want to risk him using such materials to prevent his capture." Zeno mused. "Any idea on motive?"

"No, but security is assuming this individual is an escaped convict."

"Has he attacked anyone?"

"Negative. He just ran without so much as making a threat. Though he was reported to scream 'I will not go back. I will not go back to the shadow.'"

"Well, I can see why they are assuming he is a convict in that regard. However, there are no Sangheili prisons named with the word 'shadow' in it, at least ones that are still in operation

anyway."

"The word could be symbolic instead," the AI offered.

"Perhaps, though my people are not known for vague symbolism." Zeno paused and thought a moment. "Are there cameras in that storage room the individual is hiding in and do you have access to them?"

"Yes and of course." Sesai sounded slightly insulted. "What do you think I am?"

"An annoying holographic lizard."

"Very funny, Ambassador."

"Yeah, yeah. Can you bring up a feed showing this guy for me, please?"

"Only because you asked politely."

A moment later, a live feed from a camera, obviously from the storeroom where the stowaway was holed up, appeared on the console. In it, he saw a young male Sangheili tucked away in a corner, behind a couple of large crates marked 'high explosives'. At first, Zeno thought it was Miko sitting there, the skin tone of the male's skin so similar, but then he realized this male lacked the mottling on his back Miko had, not to mention Miko has been dead for about four years now.

Shaking his head of the memories of his dead lover, Zeno concentrated on the individual on the screen, looking for clues of disposition and motive. The male had his legs up against his chest, which his head buried in crossed arms on top of his knees. The audio wasn't that great, but he thought he heard sobbing. Zeno did not know what was going on with this man, but his instincts told him that this man was no escaped convict.

"Sesai, tell the security team to stand down and to not do anything rash. I am on my way," he said, quickly throwing on a pair of civilian clothes.

"Ambassador?"

"That man is no criminalâ€|His body language is all wrong. He looks more like a frightened kid."

"As you say, Ambassador. The security team has been informed."

"Thank you, Sesai."

* * *

><p>The walk to the site only took ten minutes, but it felt like forever to Zeno. He knew the security team had to be getting antsy: ever since the attempt on the Arbiter's life nearly three years ago, they took the protection of their Sangheili dignitaries very seriously. Because of this, Zeno knew he would have his work cut out for him to convince the security team that he the stowaway was no threat and to let him handle it.<p>

"Ambassador," one of the humans, the captain of this security team, said when he arrived. "Sesai told us what you believe, but with all due respect, sirâ€¦".

"With all due respect, Captain," Zeno interrupted. "I spent over a decade working in reconnaissance, studying people and gathering information: if anyone here can judge this individual's intent with little information to go on, it would be me."

"Understandable, sir, but the potential threatâ€¦".

"Captain, that kid was doing nothing but just sitting there and I bet you that is what he is still doing. If he was intending to blow anything up or cause anyone any harm, he would have done so by now."

"And you are sure of this?"

Zeno sighed and said. "Sesai, the feed please."

-Yes, Ambassador.- Sesai's voice said from the console next to the storage room door. In a moment, the live feed appeared, and indeed, the man was in the exact position as before.

"Does this man look like a threat to you?" Zeno said, gesturing to the feed.

"Well I'll be damned," the captain said. "I have never seen an Elite huddled in a corner like that before."

"If you go in there with your guns raised, you may cause him to panic," Zeno pointed out. "You know how frightened, cornered animals can be. Frightened, cornered sentients can be even worse."

"Point taken, Ambassador. What do you suggest we do?"

"Let me go in there and talk to him," Zeno said. "I am in civilian clothing and unarmed, I would not be as intimidating as one of you, or an armored Sangheili."

"I do not know, Ambassadorâ€¦".

"If he does turn violent, I am proficient in unarmed combat: I can handle myself. Plus, you can watch how things are going on the feed."

"Alright. You convinced me. Here," the captain handed him an ear piece. "So we can communicate, in case you need anything."

Ugh, I hate these things. Zeno thought as he inserted the device into his right ear hole. Unfortunately there was no choice, considering he didn't have his armor.

-I will guide you to where the stowaway is hiding, Ambassador.- Sesai's voice suddenly said through the ear piece, making him jump.

"Dammit, Sesai, do not do that!" he growled, a couple of the humans chuckling.

My apologies, Ambassador.

Zeno sighed and shook his head. "Alright, I am going in. Wish me luck."

The humans simply nodded and he opened the door.

* * *

><p>Things just kept getting worse and worse.<p>

He took a wrong turn somewhere and ended up in this storeroom, with no way out but the way he came in. Now the security forces of this station were outside the door, likely planning on how what to do next. A part of him was telling him to just step out there and give himself up willingly, but fear held him in place. There was no guarantee they would understand his situation, why he did what he did. Chances are they would send him right back without second thought.

Why didn't I just go back home? He thought, tears in his eyes as he curled into as tight of a ball as he could. His keep, he remembered, would have helped him, supported him, if he had gone to them instead of pulling this stunt. Yet he took a coward's way instead and even his keeps level of understanding can only extend so far. As far as he was concerned, he was doomed, may as well be dead. Yet the will to live was still so strong.

What is taking them so long? he thought. _It is not like I can go anywhere._ The security team was certainly taking their sweet time coming in here: if the team was Sangheilian they would have burst in here by now.

Just then, he heard the door open.

Here it comes. He wanted to stand and face them, hands in the air in surrender, yet he remained as he was, huddled in this corner.

He couldn't see the door from his position, behind two large crates that smelled of sulfur, so he listened instead. Odd, what he was hearing was a single pair of feet, approaching cautiously, not the bum rush of half a dozen boots he was expecting. But who is to say there weren't more approaching stealthily? Hearing wasn't exactly a Sangheili's strongest sense after all.

"Hello?" a deep, slightly gravelly voice, call out. A Sangheilian voice.

His hearts started hammering: this was the last thing he wanted. A Sangheili would be the least likely to be sympathetic to his plight. "Go away!" he shouted in response, more out of reflex than anything else. If he could press himself any harder into the corner, he'd become a part of it. But his outburst only served to pinpoint his location to this individual. Within seconds, the owner of the voice appeared from behind the crates.

He had been expecting a fully armored Sangheili warrior before him, with a sword or other weapon in his hand. Instead, he was looking at a Sangheilian male dressed in civilian attire. What stood out to him

immediately was that the clothing was human in style and that this male had a series of odd black markings on his chest and left arm. His skin tone was very dark, though there was a paler section on his front. Eye color was also fairly dark, the iris reminding him somewhat of fire, but what it was that put him off guard the most was the sympathy he saw in those eyes.

"Ah, there you are," the man said, softly with no hint of aggression in his voice. "Looks like you got yourself in quite a fix mmm?"

"W-who are you?" he asked. Though the newcomer's mannerisms eased him somewhat, he was still wary of his intentions.

"Someone that wants to help you," was the answer as the man sat down, his back to the back wall, yet distant enough to leave him room to bolt if he wanted to.

"You are a Sangheili," he countered. "We kill the weak and the cowardly, why would you want to help me?"

The man visibly winced. "Because I know sometimes the situation we find ourselves in is out of our control and we should not be blamed and punished for it."

But I can be blamed for itâ€¦I wasn't strong enoughâ€¦smart enoughâ€¦ He didn't say this out loud however. "I doubt that would apply in my caseâ€¦".

The man studied him for a moment. "That remains to be seen." After a pause he asked. "What is your name?"

He thought a moment, considering. Should he give him a real name or a false one? _I am not so dishonorable that I would lie about my name,_ he decided as he said. "Sani."

3. Unexpected Help

**Authors Note:** Just a reminder to those that have read my 'Misfortunate Events' shorts: unless otherwise stated, they are not 'canon' to the _Zendou_ storyline.

Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 2: Unexpected Help

The man didn't look much younger than he was, his eyes a mix of yellow and yellow-green: not a common color combination, at least in the region Zeno was from. Zeno had also noted that he was surprised when he first revealed himself and had relaxed a little. That was the intention of course: if he had walked in here with full armor on, the man would have likely panicked.

"Alright, Sani," Zeno said, keeping his tone reassuring. "Talk to me, how did you end up in this mess?"

"Iâ€¦." Sani turned his head away. "I was trying to get away from a bad situationâ€¦."

"And ended up in another one."

Sani nodded and said nothing more.

"And you are afraid of being sent back to the first 'bad situation'?"

Another nod.

"What was that situation?"

At that, Sani balked, curling up tighter into a ball. It must have been a very bad situation indeed to cause a reaction like that. "Alright, let us try a different angle then. What did you mean by 'the Shadow'?"

Sani looked confused for a moment, but then it dawned on him what he was referring to. "The _Shadow of Intent_."

This shocked Zeno. "I admit I am confused," he said. "I worked on that very ship for a couple of years and worked with its shipmaster for even longer. I fail to see how something could get so bad on there without Rtas knowing and doing something about it."

"There was little Shipmaster Rtas _could _do..., " Sani said softly. "Andâ€¦he was not in charge when things escalated to this pointâ€¦."

_Ah, that is right. The commander is currently on extended leave, _ Zeno thought. _But surely if things were bad, he would have left instructions to prevent things from getting any worse. Unlessâ€¦._ "The one Rtas left in charge did not give a damn I take it?" Zeno asked.

Sani shook his head. "Noâ€¦Second Master Ruro did nothing at all. Called me weakâ€¦questioned that I was even Sangheiliâ€¦." The man started shaking.

Zeno remembered Ruro: that male always came off to him as someone that had a permanent stick up his ass. He was also now recalling what little he knew about Sani himself, which wasn't much at all. If he remembered correctly, Sani was one of a number of new recruits assigned to the ship that were drafted into the military service due to the Schism. Drafted, meaning under normal circumstances Sani would have never left Sanghelios. No wonder the man was having difficulties, though Zeno had the feeling there was more to it than what he knew. He could find out later though, right now, Sani needed reassurance.

"Hey, it is alright. You are far away from Ruro and whatever else it was you were trying to get away from," he said.

"Not for longâ€¦," Sani said, whimpering. "I know I will be sent backâ€¦And the pain will just start all over againâ€¦."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Forgive me, but I do not seeâ€|."

"I am the Ambassador, I can bend the rules a little if I feel it is justified."

* * *

><p>Sani recoiled at the man's admission, shocked and even a bit confused. This man, this human clothed, black marked man was the ambassador? It didn't seem to fit his image of an ambassador at all of a highly polished, fully armored, proud warrior. Someone he would expect to look down upon him as nothing. Yet, this man was sitting on the floor with him, speaking to him as if he was an equal. No, what he imagined and what he is seeing didn't fit at all.<p>

Waitâ€|, Sani thought, remembering something he heard. He overheard Rtas speaking to a zealot once about the ambassador. The zealot was questioning why the current ambassador was chosen and Rtas was saying something about how he was chosen because not only did he have more experience with humans than any other Sangheili, but because he wasn't the arrogant type. Those two things certainly fit this man before him, but that did not negate the possibility of the man pretending to be the ambassador.

What was his nameâ€| he thought. It was on the edge of his mind, but no matter how hard he tried he could not remember.

"How rude of me," the man suddenly said, a faint smile on his face. "I gave you my title, but not my name. It is Zeno 'Ribal."

Yes! That was it! Sani thought, a bit ashamed he could not recall it himself. Then again, after all the things he had been through, could he be blamed? "Zenoâ€|Iâ€|I remember the shipmaster speaking highly of you," he said softly. "But now I am even more confused as to why someone of your status would want to bother with me."

Zeno snorted faintly. "As I said before, I understand that sometimes we get into situations that are beyond our control," he explained. "With how you were discovered and the outburst you gave, people here were assuming you were an escaped criminal."

"By the Spirits! No!" Sani exclaimed, horrified at the thought. "I am not criminal."

"Well, stowing away on a ship _is_ a crime," Zeno pointed out. Sani whimpered and shrunk back. "Though I will admit I am not innocent myself," Zeno continued. "So I know that sometimes we can get so desperate that we end up doing something stupid and foolish."

"Yeahâ€|What I did here was definitely stupid and foolish," Sani muttered, mostly to himself. "There was at least one other option I could have taken instead."

"Such as?"

"To go back home, to my keep," Sani said with a heavy sigh.

"Theyâ€¦They would have understood my situation and protected me."

Zeno looked doubtful. "You are certain of that?"

"Yes. Thoughâ€¦I-I admit that after what I did now, I do not know if they would be as understanding."

The ambassador made a rumbling noise in his throat. "Let us worry about one thing at a time," he said. "I know you are trying to get away from a bad situation, a situation Rtas could not do much to help you with, correct?" Sani nodded. "I tell you what, you come with me and I will give you a warm meal to fill your no doubt aching belly and a safe, warm place to sleep tonight. I will contact Rtas and tell him what happened. We will figure things out from there."

Sani's eyes widened in shock. "Whaâ€¦What about tomorrow?" he asked, his voice shaking. "What about Second Master Ruro?"

"Unless Rtas surprises me, you will likely remain in my personal care until this is figured out. As for Ruroâ€¦Fuck him: I hate assholes like him. I am certain between Rtas and I, we can figure out a solution you would accept."

"But you know nothing about why I did this!"

"Not _exactly_, no, but I made my living during the war figuring out motivations and other things from what scant information I could gather. You get the right pieces and you can usually figure it out. Plus I consider myself a good judge of character: you are not a bad person, Sani, you just got yourself into a situation you did not know how to get back out of. I feel you deserve a second chance and I want to give you that chance."

A second chanceâ€¦, Sani thought, tears threatening to well up in his eyes. Wasn't that the reason he pulled this stunt in the first place? To remove himself from a bad life and try to start a new one? And here was the Ambassador offering the same thing, with no apparent strings attached. It seemed too good to be true.

"Sani." He looked up and saw that Zeno had risen to his feet, a hand extended out to him. "Come with me, and I will do what I can to make things better for you."

Sani stared at his hand, knowing what the gesture meant, but also knowing the concept was rather foreign to most Sangheili. You either stand on your own feet or don't stand at all and to help another was rather rare. _Rtas tried to help me,_ he remembered. _And now the Ambassador wants to try._ Could the Ambassador succeed where Rtas has failed?

He so badly wanted that to be true.

With a slight hesitation, Sani reached up and took Zeno's handâ€¦.

* * *

><p>It was hard to concentrate and keep a kind expression on his face when Sesai was protesting his decision in his ear hole. Unfortunately, there was no way to block her or otherwise turn her

off: not that it would help anyway since this was a highly advanced AI he was dealing with. When Sani finally took his offered his hand, he ended up with a slightly awkward situation on top of that.<p>

The smaller male, just after raising to his feet, suddenly wrapped his arms around him and started sobbing, soft 'thank you's' being muttered, over and over again. Zeno was taken by surprise at first, but then his hearts melted a little: Sani had to have been desperate indeed to end up breaking down like this. Sesai had gone quiet at that point, likely as surprised as he was.

"It is OK," Zeno said to him softly, lightly wrapping his arms around Sani in a comforting embrace. It feltâ€|Oddâ€|to be holding someone like this again. "So long as you are with me, I will not let any harm come to you."

_Ambassador, need I remind you that you do not have the authority to be making suchâ€|. _ Sesai started yammering in his ear again.

"Sesai, shut up and let the security team know we are coming out," Zeno said with a tired sigh.

"Hu-who?" Sani asked, looking up at him.

"Sesai, station AI," Zeno explained, tapping the ear piece. "She was protesting my decision."

"O-ohâ€|Iâ€|I do not want you to get in trouble on my accountâ€|."

"Do not worry about me," Zeno said with a smile. "I _like_ giving that annoying lizard a hard time."

_I __**heard __**that._ Sesai growled. Zeno ignored her.

"Ifâ€|If you say soâ€|," Sani said.

"Come," Zeno said, keeping an arm around Sani's shoulders as he gently led him back out. "A warm meal and a soft bed awaits."

It didn't take long for them to reach the exit, where the security team was waiting. The moment Sani saw them though, he balked and hid behind him. It didn't help any that the captain immediately reached to pull out a pair of cuffs.

"Captain, you will not be needing those," Zeno said quickly. "I will take care of him."

"Sir, protocol states that all individuals being transported to the brig must be restrained," the captain protested.

"He is not going to the brig," Zeno explained. "He will be staying with me."

The human blinked as he absorbed this new information. "Sir I must protest! The potential threat to your lifeâ€|."

"On my honor, Sani is of no threat to my life or to any one else on this station. I will take full responsibility for his actions from

here on out."

The captain as flabbergasted. "You Elites and your honor," he grumbled. "Alright, but if he turns on you, don't come to me."

"Fair enough, oh and here is your earpiece back: I am tired of Sesai snarling in my ear."

The captain simply shook his head as he accepted the earpiece back. "Good luck, Ambassador, I hope you are right about him."

"I am certain I am."

* * *

><p>Sani was certain he had been tricked when he saw the security team start to reach for him. A part of him wanted to bolt, but the logical part of his mind told him that he wouldn't get far if he did. He had felt the strength in Zeno's hand, though the ambassador's grip had been gentle: Sani was certain that Zeno could catch him easily on his own, if the security team didn't shoot him first. So he just hid behind the ambassador, certain that Zeno was about to turn him over to them any second.<p>

He listened to Zeno converse with the security team's leader in the human's language, unable to understand a word of it. Zeno sounded assertive, if a little annoyed, while the human sounded like he was upset. Then, to his surprise, he heard the team start to leave. Confused, he peeked around the ambassador and saw that they were indeed, leaving. He looked up at Zeno, a questioning look on his face.

"What? You thought I was going to turn you over to them?" Zeno said, sounding slightly hurt. "I am a man of honor, Sani: I do not go against my word."

Sani blushed, feeling foolish. Of course the ambassador was an honorable man; otherwise he wouldn't be the ambassador! "Forgive meâ€|Iâ€|," he started to say.

"It is alright," Zeno interrupted. "You have been through a lot, so it is not that unreasonable to not completely trust me or anyone else here yet."

"Ohâ€|." As they started on their way once more, Sani asked. "Soâ€|where are you taking me?"

"I have a guest room in my quarters," Zeno replied. "I do not have any dignitaries coming over for a while, to my knowledge at least, so you can use it for the time being."

Sani was once again surprised: to be assisted by the ambassador was one thing, but to actually stay in the same space? "You are sure you want to do that?" he asked.

"Positive." Zeno smiled, then his face turned serious. "We have a small population of Sangheili here: most are doctors learning the human techniques in that trade, but there are a few warriors here as well. Warriors that may decide to try to do you harm if they find out the circumstances of your arrival here. Therefore, it may be too

dangerous for you to stay in a place on your own for the time being."

"I see," Sani said, agreeing with the logic. "That means so long as I am with youâ€¦?"

"They will not touch you."

"But that does not exclude youâ€¦," Sani said softly to himself. To his embarrassment, Zeno heard him.

"Hmm? Am I making you uncomfortable?" he asked.

"N-noâ€¦Iâ€¦Iâ€¦." Sani couldn't get the words out, his face turning purple as he became flustered.

Again, Zeno smiled at him. "If at any time something I say or do make you feel uncomfortable, just say so and I will cease. Alright?"

Sani simply nodded.

* * *

><p>Zeno looked down at Sani, a bit concerned. This last bit of conversation added more pieces to the puzzle that was Sani, pieces that gave him a clearer idea on what was going on with this Sangheili. Zeno felt his subtly spoken worry about him doing anything to him tied in with his questioning about staying with Zeno. That suggested the source of the problem was likely a roommate, or someone similar that he spends a great deal of every day with.<p>

He wasn't going to press him for details though. Sani was obviously uncomfortable about it, even ashamed, which in on itself was a clue. He knew how dangerous it was to assume things though, so he avoided speculating on it right now. Sani would fill him in when he is ready to and right now, it was more important to ensure he felt safe and comfortable.

Speaking of Sani, he was getting more and more nervous as they walked. Was he really that concerned Zeno would try to pull something on him? By this point though, Zeno felt that words would not be enough to reassure him: his actions will need to support them. When they entered his residence, Zeno resisted the habit of locking the door right away, not wanting Sani to get the wrong idea. Afterward, he gently coaxed Sani to the guest room.

"You are free to take a shower if you want," Zeno told him.

"I...I probably should," Sani confessed. "I do not even remember the last time I washedâ€¦."

Zeno smiled at him and showed him how to operate the shower. "Just leave your clothes on the edge of the bed," he said once he was certain Sani understood. "I will see if I have any spares you can use until what you are wearing now can be properly cleaned. I will also see about a light meal for you to tie you over until morning."

"Th-thank youâ€¦."

Zeno turned to leave, to give Sani some privacy when he remembered something fairly important. "Oh, uhâ€|there is one rule I haveâ€|," he said, feeling slightly embarrassed.

* * *

><p>Oh gods, here we goâ€|, Sani thought. _Please do not be like' him'â€|pleaseâ€|_ "Wha...What is that?" he asked, unable to hide the nervousness in his voice.

Zeno visibly swallowed. "Every time you take a shower, please dry yourself off _completely_ before stepping out of the bathroom," he replied.

Sani blinked: of all the rules he had heard, that was certainly one of the weirder ones. He was relieved that was all it was, but still, he couldn't help but feel a bit confused. "Huh? Why?"

"Trust me; it will save us both from having awkward and embarrassing situations." Was all Zeno added on the matter. "Enjoy your washâ€|I will let you know when the food arrives."

Sani nodded, muttering a soft 'thank you' as Zeno finally left the room completely, closing the door behind him. He waited a moment before gladly stripping off his soiled clothes, setting them on the bed as Zeno requested, before returning to the bathroom. Sani locked the bathroom door behind him and then stepped into the shower, operating it as Zeno showed him.

Oh gods, the water felt so good. For a moment, Sani just stood there, savoring it: he even purred for the first time in what must have been months. Eventually, he forced himself to actually begin washing, which also brought relief. It felt good to finally wash away the filth and stench he accumulated from the journey here. It also was relief to be able to wash without 'someone' coming in andâ€|.

He shook his head, banishing the thought from his mind. Zeno had not done anything to harm or otherwise take advantage of him. _So far,_ Sani reminded himself. After all, 'he' wasn't like that toward him initially either. Time will tell if Zeno will turn on him like 'he' did.

The shower done, Sani stepped out and made sure to dry himself off thoroughly like Zeno asked, though he was still puzzled as to why Zeno was picky about such a trivial thing. When he stepped out of the bathroom, he found a set of simple clothes on the bed. After putting them on, he found that they were a bit on the big side, though considering Zeno was taller and larger than he was, it was not surprising.

Just then, there was a knock on the door, making him jump. "Y-ye-yes?" he called out.

"Food is here," Zeno voice, slightly muffled, replied.

With a relieved sigh, Sani stepped outside the room. Mmm, whatever it was Zeno ordered for him, it smelled good. Then again, considering how hungry he was, _any_ food probably would have smelled good to him right now.

Zeno directed him to a table by the living area, where a plate of various meats sat waiting for him. "I did not know what human foods you have had before, so I just ordered a smaller version of my usual," Zeno explained as Sani sat at the table. "Want something to drink?"

"Yes, please," Sani said as he looked over the offerings on the plate. He had indeed eaten some human food before, so most of it was familiar to him. Zeno came back a moment later, placing a bottle of water by his plate.

"I have to use bottled water here," he explained when Sani raised a brow at him. "Something they use in the purification system on the station does not agree with me."

Sani just nodded and started to eat. It was hard to not just wolf everything down at once, as hungry as he was, but he managed somehow. He drank the water quickly afterward, once he figured out how to do with this odd drinking structure human's use.

"How do you feel?" Zeno asked when he was finished.

"Better," Sani confessed. "Thoughâ€¦I am a bit tired."

"After all that running around and the stress you were under? I am not surprised," Zeno said softly. "It is the night cycle right now anyway, so it is best you get some sleep."

Sani nodded and stood. "I think I will," he said as he headed back toward the guest room. "Ohâ€¦Zeno?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank youâ€¦".

"My pleasure."

Sani managed a smile and closed the door behind him. Then he climbed into the covers of the bed, only bothering to remove his shirt. This bed, though foreign to him in shape, felt very welcoming indeed. With a yawn, Sani closed his eyes, and fell asleep, hoping things continued to look his wayâ€¦.

4. Finding More Pieces

****Authors Note:**** Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 3: Finding More Pieces

Zeno waited about thirty minutes before quietly opening the door and checked on Sani. _Good, looks like he had no trouble falling asleep._ He thought with a smile as he carefully closed the door again. Sani

seemed to be adjusting to staying here well so far and Zeno hoped he could help him out more. To do so further though, required him to speak to a certain commander he knew.

While he was tired himself from the long day, Zeno knew he would not be able to get any sleep until he spoke to Rtas. Hoping it was at least close to morning on Sanghelios, Zeno walked to the communications console "Sesai," he called out, hoping the AI wasn't still peeved at him for earlier.

"Yes, Ambassador?" The blue eastern dragon said, a hint of annoyance in her tone.

Great, she is still a bit angry, he thought, though he couldn't keep the smirk on his face. "I would like to make a very long distance call to Sanghelios," he said, following up with the appropriate authorization code and the address he wanted.

Sesai flickered for a couple of seconds as she inputted the data. "Call going out, Ambassador. Do keep in mind that due to the distance, there will be a delay."

"You are not going to try to sabotage my call are you?"

The AI looked insulted. "It is against protocol to tamper with official calls, Ambassador, you know that."

"Just checkin."

Sesai huffed and disappeared, Zeno snickering a bit before the voice of a tired, and slightly annoyed, Rtas 'Vadum was heard.

Hello?-

"Hello, Commander," Zeno said cheerfully. "I hope I did not wake you."

There was a faint grumble. _"I was about to get up anyway._

Yeah, right. Zeno thought, having to suppress another snicker.

_What is it, Zeno?- _Rtas continued._ - It is not like you to call me like this._

"It is in regards to one of your troops, Commander."

Which one?-

"Sani."

There was faint rustling, or was that static, before Rtas spoke again. _"What happened this time?-_ Rtas' voice sounded a lot more alert and his tone was one of concern. Zeno was bothered by the 'this time' part of his question. It almost sounded like Sani was at least partly responsible for his trouble.

Let's not jump to conclusions, Zeno told himself as he said. "He

was found stowing away in a crate from a supply ship that just arrived today at the Cairo. Gave the security teams quite a start and he holed up in a supply room. I was told about the situation by the station AI and I was able to calm him down and get him to come out."

There was a heavy sigh. __-Where is he now?--__

"My guest room, sleeping."

__-I am surprised he is not in the brig.--__

"I felt it was not needed, commander. He was a lot more frightened than threatening. However, I do not know much about his background beyond that he is assigned to your ship and that he was trying to get away from something, or someone."

__-Someone.--__ Rtas confirmed with another heavy sigh.

"Sir?"

__-Sani is a good troop, one of the best snipers on the ship. Unfortunately, he somehow ended up in a bad situation with his roommate.--__

Though Rtas would not see it, Zeno nodded: it was as he was starting to suspect as such himself. "If they did not get along then why not separate them?" he asked.

__-It is a bit more complicated than that, Zeno. These two have known each other for some time prior to getting drafted and at some point I suspect they got more intimately involved with each other.--__

This was ending up worse than Zeno thought: while he didn't know much about domestic abuse on Sangheili side of things, he had read plenty on the human side. If Sani was in such a relationship, it would explain a lot of his behavior. "Semmos?" he asked, for clarifications sake.

__-I am fairly certain his roommate, Runi, is: Saniâ€¦I am not so sure. Regardless, Sani never went into the moreâ€¦intimateâ€¦details when he came to me with issues. Usually only came to me when he was choked, beatenâ€¦those kinds of things. I suspect worse was happening, but I cannot do anything about it if he does not tell me.--__

"So basically, Sani was driven to desperation," Zeno said, unable to hide the bitterness in his voice. "I am surprised you did not do more to curb the behavior, commander."

__-There was little I 'could' do, Zeno.--__ Rtas said with another sigh. __â€¦You know we have no laws making such a thing a crime. I have tried having Runi transferred to another ship, but either there were no openings or the Shipmaster took one look at his record and refused him. I would see about having Sani transferred instead, but I would rather keep the kid close until I know he is going to be OK. Unlessâ€¦|--__

"Unless what, commander?"

Zeno, I know the Shadow of Intent will not be returning to the Sol system for another four months. That should give Sani time to calm down and get back some self-confidence.

"Provided your Second Master does not decide to come early to see if he is here."

Rtas snorted. _"Considering Second Master Ruro did not bother to inform me of Sani's disappearance from the ship in the first place, it is plain he does not care about his situation. Thus I highly doubt he will even bother looking for him, writing him off as a coward._

Zeno snarled at that. "But that could cause problems with his keep."

I intend to inform his keep of his situation.

"No offense, commander, but would that not just make things worse?"

_The Hilvum keep isâ€|different, Zeno. They take care of their own, not shove them away when they get into situations like this. It is strange that Sani did not go to them firstâ€|. _

"He did admit he wished he had done so to me, commander."

I see. Anyway, you are to watch over him. Do what you can for him.

Zeno's eyes widened at that. Yes, he was planning on watching over him until they figured something out, like preparing to have Sani returned to his keep, but this sounded permanent. "Commander, I have a full plate asâ€|."

Do not give me that Brute dung, Zeno. I know things have slowed down considerably over there. Besides, you could use more contact with our kind.

"Commander! Iâ€|"

That is an order, Sub-Commander Zeno 'Ribal. I am going back to sleep, now. Signing out.

Before Zeno could speak again, the connection was cut off. "Dammit," Zeno groaned, sitting down heavily on his couch. "Did you forget _why_ I wanted to isolate myself, commander?"

"Problem, Ambassador?" Sesai asked, reappearing over the console.

"It seems I am going to have a permanent house guest, Sesai."

"Aww, but you seemed so _eager_ to keep him, Ambassador."

Zeno snarled, realizing he walked into that one. "Sesai."

"Yes, Ambassador?"

"Shuddup. "

* * *

><p>The next morningâ€|

It had been the best sleep he has had in months, if not at least a year.

Sani stretched a bit, tempted to just stay in bed and savor its warmth, its non-judgmental embrace. He knew though that Zeno was likely had breakfast waiting for him, so he slipped out of bed and put the shirt Zeno loaned him back on. The pants were a bit wrinkled, but there was nothing that could be done about that right now.

"Good morning," he heard Zeno say when he stepped out of the room a moment later. "Did you sleep well?"

"Wonderfully," Sani replied, turning to face him. His breath hitched in his throat when he saw what the ambassador chose to wear today: while the pants were the same style, though a different color, he opted to wear a vest instead of a shirt. This exposed much of his torso and Sani liked what he was seeing. _It is not polite to stare,_ he reminded himself, quickly redirecting his gaze to Zeno's face. While he had long grown comfortable with being a _sebo_, someone who went either way, this was the _ambassador_ for spirits sake! He likely had a mate at home on Sanghelios, or twoâ€|.

"That is good to hear," Zeno said. "Breakfast arrived a moment ago, if you are hungry."

In response, Sani's stomach audibly growled and Sani blushed with embarrassment. Zeno laughed, whether at his noisy stomach or his embarrassment, he didn't know.

"Well, I guess we know your stomach's vote," he said with a smile, gesturing for Sani to go ahead. "Just take care with the bacon: it looks like they overcooked it today so it may fall apart before you can get it into your mouth."

Sani nodded as he sat at the table and dug in, Zeno sitting across from him and starting on his own plate. Neither spoke, both preferring to focus on eating. The bacon was indeed overcooked, to the point where they both had to drink water in order to get it down their throats.

"I will file a complaint about the bacon later," Zeno grumbled as he finished. "I know some humans like it crispy, but this is ridiculous: meat should not be the consistency of ash."

Sani giggled a bit at his comment. When Zeno raised a brow at him, he blushed shyly, to which Zeno smiled. "Well, good to see you are in good spirits," Zeno said. "I have news."

"Wha-what is that?" Sani asked, suddenly feeling nervous.

"The commander has ordered me to take care of you and to figure out a solution to your problem."

Sani blinked, confused. "Commanderâ€|?"

Zeno blinked a moment in turn, confused himself by Sani's confusion. "Oh!" Zeno said when it apparently clicked. "Rtas."

"Ohâ€¦I did not know the shipmaster could order an ambassador aroundâ€¦".

"Rtas is not just a shipmaster, but commander of Special Operations," Zeno explained. "Military wise, my rank is sub-commander of Special Operations, so he outranks me there."

"Ah, I understand now." Sani had assumed Rtas had given up his Special Operations rank. "D-did he say anything else?"

Zeno seemed conflicted with himself for a moment. Finally, he sighed and said. "He told me what he knew about your problem."

Sani immediately turned his head away, feeling a bit betrayed. "Wha-Why did heâ€¦".

"Because he knew I would need to know in order to help you," Zeno said. "I will also need to know anything you have not told him."

The very thought of telling anyone just how badâ€¦.

"No, I cannotâ€¦" Sani said, shaking his head.

"I am not saying you need to tell me right now," Zeno reassured him. "We have four months until the _Shadow of Intent_ returns to this system. So we have some time for you to get comfortable enough to tell me."

Four monthsâ€¦, Sani thought. _Four months of freedom before I end up in that hell again._ "Y-you will do everything you can to keep me from going back right?"

"You have my word that I will look at every angle, every possibility, to try to make it so you never have to go back to that situation again."

* * *

><p>What can I do? Zeno thought as they sat in silence at the table. _This kind of thing is Ella's gig, not mine._ _ She is the one with all the psychological knowledge._ Ella, unfortunately, was back on Sanghelios, tending to her firstborn along with Rtas. Lucky bastards. _Zeno, the commander would not have put this responsibility on you if he did not feel you would figure something out,_ he told himself with a sigh. _And figure something out I will, once I have as much information as possible._

He realized that may take time, depending on how long it took for Sani to open up to him. If it was more than just physical abuse as Rtas suspected, then it might take a long time indeed for him to find out most of the details. _I need to build his trust,_ he thought. _The more he trusts me, the more likely he will tell me everything._ There was no guarantee of that though, Miko never telling him about how violent his keep was toward semos was proof of that.

Mikoâ€¦. Zeno crushed his eyes closed, forcing the memories and the grief back. He could not afford to shed tears in front of Sani: Sani

needed someone that was strong both physically and mentally. Still, it was hard not to think of the past.

"Ambassador?" Sani's voice drew him back to the present before his mind had gone too far. "Are you alright?"

"I am fine," Zeno said quickly. "Just, thinking about my own past." His eyes widened slightly when he got an idea. If he told Sani what he went through over the years, maybe Sani would relate enough to open up about his own troubles.

"You know," he began, leaning on the table. "I was in a somewhat similar situation as you are, many years ago."

"I kind of doubt that, Ambassador," Sani said softly, though Zeno did catch the light of interest in his eyes.

"First off, you can just call me 'Zeno'," Zeno corrected gently. "Especially when we are in my quarters."

"O-OK."

"Second, yes, I was. I was only a minor, fresh out of war college and on my first ship, first campaign, everything. Problem was, was that the field master I was assigned under hated me."

"Wha-why?"

"He hated semos and other, what he considered to be, _imperfect_ Sangheili." From the widening of Sani's eyes, he knew he definitely had Sani's attention now. "During a mission, he tried to get me killed a number of times. When I proved to be too resourceful to be killed off that way, he resorted to dirty tricks. He drugged my water, sabotaged my armor, stole my weapons and then left me behind on a human controlled planet."

"By the spirits."

"I wandered that forsaken place for about a month before I was found by a squad of Special Operations Sangheili. There was initial concern that I was a deserter, but that got cleared up quickly. Though I was in bad shape, I assisted them with their mission: nearly cost me my life in the end. The SpecOps commander of the time was impressed with my abilities and had me transferred to his unit, where I remain to this day."

"That is interesting, Ambassador Zeno, but I do not see how your situation and mine are similar."

"I admit it is likely quite a stretch, but the point is that no matter how bad the situation you are in is, there is always a way out. You just have to find the right path, or meet the right people. That SpecOps team was my path to a new life. I do not know if I am meant to be the one to help you with the same, Sani, but I intend to try."

* * *

><p>Zeno took him out shopping once it was clear the conversation was over. Sani honestly did not know what to say then anyway, and still

didn't as Zeno led him to the market place. What Zeno told him about himself was in the back of his mind and there was something about Zeno himself that made him want to trust him. Yet there was that fear, the fear that this was all a ruse, all a ploy to get him to relax so Zeno could do the same to him as Runi did.

However everything he was seeing, all that he was hearing, and all that he was feeling deep within himself was that Zeno would never harm him. _I have known him for less than a day,_ Sani told himself. _It is impossible to know for certain so soon._

Or was it?

The deciding factor came when Zeno got distracted with a human asking him a question. Zeno had told him to explore, but advised him not to go too far. Sani wandered a little, making sure to stay within eye sight of Zeno, checking out some of the other shops. It didn't take long for him to be noticed by someone less than pleasant: one of the few warriors Zeno warned him about last night.

"What do we have here?" a voice snarled behind him, making his blood freeze. Slowly he turned around to see an ultra looking down his snout at him. "Why I do believe you are the little coward that was running about the station yesterday."

It is not Runi, he reminded himself, straightening himself up as tall as he could. "Who are you to judge me?" he said boldly, though it was taking every ounce of will to do so.

The ultra laughed, then shoved him. Sani lost his footing and landed heavily on the floor. "I should slay you were you lay for your cowardice, boy," the ultra snorted, reaching for his sword.

No..no..NO! Sani started to scramble to his feet, completely forgetting about anything else but to escape.

Then something dark slammed into the ultra. The ultra taken completely off guard, was sent crashing to the floor. 'Who dares!' the warrior growled, as he got to his feet. "Who dares stop me from doing a warrior's duty!"

"'Warrior's duty'?" a familiar voice growled. Sani looked up to see Zeno standing between them. "Do not make me sick with such drivels."

"Ambassador!" Whatever gusto the warrior had quickly evaporated. "Wha-what are you doing with thisâ€|."

"You know nothing of this man's situation and thus have no right to judge him. You also apparently did not get the word that this Sangheili is under my protection. If anyone, and I mean _anyone_, harms him they will have to deal with me. Understood?"

The ultra looked like he was going to say something several times in protest before finally giving up. "Understood, Ambassadorâ€|," he grumbled before walking away.

Zeno watched him for a moment before looking at Sani. "Are you alright?" he asked, offering a hand.

"Yes," Sani said, accepting his hand. "Thank youâ€|."

"Hopefully that will be the only one to try to bother you."

"I hope so tooâ€|."

Sani found himself replaying what happened in his head over and over again for the next hour. The ultra had been fully armored and armed, while Zeno was unarmed and wearing only civilian clothing: if a fight had actually broken out, Zeno would have been at a severe disadvantage. Yet, the ultra had backed down quickly: was it out of respect for this title, the weight of authority in his voice, something else, or a combination?

Either way, Zeno had willingly put his life on the line for him. That, along with the other acts of kindness he had shown him so far, helped Sani make his decision. "Zenoâ€|," he said softly after they returned to Zeno's quarters that afternoon.

"Yes, Sani?" Zeno replied, a smile on his face.

"Iâ€|." Sani hung his head and shifted his feet, his hearts hammering in his chest. "I want to tell you somethingâ€|."

Zeno was clearly both surprised and intrigued. "And what is that?"

"Everything."

5. History of the Hilvums

Authors Note: Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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<p>Chapter 4: History of the Hilvums

"Are you sure?" Zeno asked, a bit surprised that Sani was willing to open up to him so soon.

"I-I am sure," Sani said, fidgeting. "You need to know the full story so you can better help meâ€|And to know whether or not I am really worth helpingâ€|."

Zeno nodded and directed him to the couch. After they both sat down, it looked like Sani was having difficulty continuing.

"Take your time," Zeno told him. "I know it must be difficult to admit these kinds of things."

"Iâ€|I do not know where to startâ€|," Sani admitted: the man was shaking again.

"Let's start with something easy, then," Zeno offered. "Was what Rtas told me true? That your troubles center around someone named Runi?"

Sani visibly flinched at that name, confirming that much at least before Sani even responded. "Yes," Sani said softly. "Though there are things I never could bring myself to tell Rtas."

"We both suspected as much," Zeno said. "What else has he done to you?"

Sani started to shake and Zeno could see tears. The younger male wrapped his arms around himself, like the very memory brought him the same amount of pain and terror as when it actually happened. Zeno knew then, that even though Sani wanted to tell him, he couldn't.

"It is OK," Zeno said, reaching over and pulling Sani into an embrace. "You do not have to go into detail now if it makes you feel uncomfortable."

"I-I never wanted to leave home!" Sani cried, suddenly. "I wanted to stay with my ut'su flocks: I never wanted to join the military and fightâ€¦If I did, I would have joined the Tal'sora rather than the Ses'soraâ€¦."

Zeno blinked: he knew different keeps likely had different traditions and such, but he had never heard of anything like that before. Still, this would provide an opportunity to have Sani talk about something he was more comfortable with, even if it likely didn't have anything to do with his situation.

"Tal'sora? Ses'sora? What are those?" he asked.

Sani pulled away and looked at him, a bit confused. "Oh!" he said when it dawned on him. "Iâ€¦I am sorry, I forget sometimes that my keep is very different from many others."

"How so?" Zeno pried, remembering Rtas mentioning something similar.

"Well, for one we have a ruling council, rather than a kaidon. The council is made up the most senior member from each sora, or caste. There are five soras in all: the Tal'sora, the warriors, Mon'sora, the scholars, Ses'sora, the herders and farmers, Chi'sora, the craftsmen, and the Tor'sora, the traders. All soras are based on the different groups we were in before our ancestors rebelled and took the keep for our own."

Zeno raised a brow at that. "Rebelled?"

"My ancestors were slaves."

He was definitely taken back by that. Zeno had never heard of a Sangheili keeping another Sangheili as a slave, let alone a whole keep worth of them. He was also having trouble seeing how any Sangheili could be reduced to being a slave: honor and pride usually led them to killing themselves at first opportunity. "How?" he asked.

"How exactly my ancestors became enslaved was lost to time," Sani replied sadly. "That they were denied any form of education, beyond what was needed for our tasks, likely ensured we forgot where we originally came from."

"I still fail to see how any Sangheili keep would sink that low to do such a thing."

"The Juroms, my ancestor's masters, were of the opinion their bloodline should only be warriors, even the females," Sani explained. "But seeing they needed people to do the tasks they felt were beneath them, they had my ancestors do it for them. They had them do everything save teach their own young. It would turn out to work against them in the end."

Zeno was starting to understand. If these Jurom kept knowledge from the Hilvum ancestors, they would not know about pride and honor. They likely didn't even know what it was to be a Sangheili.

"How did your ancestors free themselves?" he asked.

"The Sangheili and San 'Shyyum war," Sani said simply. "Towards the end, their numbers were decimated and since they had been sending in their female warriors to fight as well, they could not repopulate as quickly as a normal keep. In desperation, to give themselves time to recover before a rival keep noticed their weakness, they started sending the males of my ancestors to fight in their stead."

"By the godsâ€¦."

"Uneducated and untrained in the acts of war, most perished, but a few managed to endure. These few, likely with the help of sympathetic warriors from other keeps, discovered what they had been denied. When the war ended, they returned and started training others on what they learned in secret. When they felt they were ready, they attacked. The Jurom's fell quickly and the state became the State of Hilvum. The first warriors ultimately decided to not elect a kaidon: they felt one man having so much power would be too risky."

"So they went with a council, spreading the power."

"Correct."

"Quite a history. Unique even."

Sani blushed, a faint smile on his face. "The knowledge of our past is not widely known outside the keep and we prefer to keep it that way."

"Let me guess: those that found out you were slaves once felt you were easy pickings."

"Indeed, though each time they were proven quite wrong. My people learned to take care of each other and how to stand up to those that try to bully us."

"And yetâ€¦."

"My keeps past has little do to with my current situation," Sani

said, sounding a bit insulted. "Yes, my people tend to be timid and shy, myself being no exception, but we stand up for ourselves when we feel threatened." He sighed as he added. "No, what happened with me was not instant, it happened gradually, getting worse and worse as time went on."

It sounded familiar, if he recalled what he read about humans in similar situations correctly. "Runi wore you down mentally, telling lies and half-truths, in order to control you?"

Sani shuddered and nodded. "Yes—Exactly. I did not realize it until it was too late, because I was too naïve to see the warning signs—."

"It is not your fault," Zeno told him. "From what I have read, humans end up in the same situation a lot, with the same sort of mind trickery and conditioning. Besides, you are here now; obviously you found a way to break free and try to break the cycle."

"Yes, but not before he had done so much to me—I am but a shadow of my former self—Broken, lost—."

Zeno sighed and took Sani's hand. "But you do not have to remain that way. You can recover and take back the life you once had."

"I do not see how."

"One step at a time. Rtas told me you are a sniper."

"Yes." There was a hint of pride in his voice, but it quickly disappeared when he said. "Though my long range abilities did nothing to help protect me from Runi."

"Do you have any hand to hand training?"

"I do, but I was never strong enough to fend him off when I did fight back."

"Fighting in melee is not always about strength, Sani," Zeno told him. "Technique, skill, speed and agility also play a factor. For instance, I duel wield an energy sword variant called the kisan: it is a blade meant for quick precise blows and parries, rather than heavy strikes like the traditional energy sword. How big is this Runi?"

Sani thought a moment. "Only a little shorter than you, Zeno, but more heavily built."

Zeno nodded. "So he sounds someone that likes to use the strength he has in a fight." When Sani nodded, he continued. "If I can have you trained in techniques that are designed to counter that, you may be able to stand up to him."

Sani balked at that. "St-stand up to him? But I—."

"You can, Sani. You just need the will and the knowledge on how," Zeno said. "And I know just the person to help you."

* * *

><p>Sani had his doubts, but he could tell that Zeno had made up his mind and wasn't going to change it. He had learned the hard way that resisting someone whose mind was set was futile and often painful. Granted, Zeno had yet to do anything to actually harm in any way, but why take the chance? Like Runi, his current niceness could just be a front for terror later.<p>

He really didn't want to believe Zeno was the same way as Runi. The positive things that had happened so far he wanted to keep happening. But the painful experiences of the past hung like a gloom over his head and in his mind, reminding him that things may not always be as they seemed. His mind kept switching between hope and doubt, with doubt lingering far longer.

"Y-you are sure of this?" Sani asked.

"I am," Zeno replied, smiling. "Just because someone is bigger and stronger than you, does not mean they are better than you."

That smile, it seemed so genuine. Was it because he wanted it to be so or because it truly was? "Alright," he said softly. "I have my doubts it will do any good though."

"It will, I promise. Oh, how much of the human language do you know?"

"Virtually none, why?"

"Ah, you will need to understand this guy I am going to introduce you too, as he does not know Sangheilian." Zeno walked over to a drawer, opened it and rummaged around a bit before pulling out a headset. "Here," he said, handing it to him. "It is a translator. I keep it around in case a visiting dignitary is without his armor translating software."

"Ah, yes, that will be helpful," Sani said as accepted it and slipped it on.

"Should probably teach you their main language as well, come think of itâ€|."

"Main? They have more than one?"

"Aye, hundreds of different languages, including the dialects. All workers here in the UNSC though are required to know English, their primary language. That translator can translate all the different languages though, to be on the safe side."

"I seeâ€|so, when I am going to start thisâ€|training?"

Sani watched as Zeno looked at a calendar, then a clock. "Today, he should be in his dojo now," Zeno said. "Hopefully he will not still have that grudge against meâ€|"

"Grudge?"

"Yeahâ€|." Zeno sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck as they walked out the door. "When I first came here, I was looking for a place to practice my sword forms when I found his dojo. I thought it was a sparring room open to all, so I started working out. He came in, saw

me, started screaming at me in Japanese, which I did not understand, then soundly kicked my ass. Never saw a human move like that beforeâ€¦."

"What did you do that pissed him off so much?"

"Many martial arts masters are big on respect for themselves and the dojo they do their teaching in. That I had come in without permission and started using the place like I owned it was a big no, no. Once a friend of mine explained this to me, I went back to apologize and ask for forgiveness for desecrating his dojo. It was clear he had little love for our kind: he started berating me again, this time in English, saying how we thought we were all big and bad, how we thought we know honor, that sort of thing."

"He really had it in for youâ€¦."

"Yeah, but he accepted my apology in the end, on the condition I be his training dummy for a monthâ€¦."

"Oh myâ€¦."

"Yeahâ€¦I was well tenderized throughout that month: good thing we Sangheili are naturally built tough."

"I am surprised he did not lay off once he learned you were the Ambassador."

"Well, I suspect he was holding back for that very reason, plus a training dummy is no good if you break it on the first day after all."

Sani giggled slightly at that. "Yeah, I suppose that is a good point."

* * *

><p>The walk to the dojo wasn't far and as they approached, Zeno could see that he was correct that Yamasheto was in: students from his last class were just leaving. He hoped he would be willing to take on a special student. Sani still looked doubtful this human could help him, but also apprehensive on what he may be facing.

"Zeno," Sani said as they reached the door. "A question."

"What is that, Sani?" Zeno replied.

"If he does not know Sangheilian, how is he to understand me? What if I have questions?"

"I doubt you will have many opportunities to ask a question, with the way this dojo is run. He may surprise me in that regard, depending on how he reacts to your situation. I will be with you to translate your questions, plus to be aâ€¦willing victim for demonstrations." Zeno winced at the thought, though he thought he heard Sani giggle at that. "Most of the time though, count on only being allowed to say things like 'Yes, Sensei'."

Sani looked a bit surprised. "Sensei? This translator just told me it

means 'master'â€|."

"It also means 'teacher', which is the context you should keep in mind here: always refer to him as 'sensei'. Also, you are required to bow both when entering and leaving the main floor."

"More of that respect thing?"

"Correct."

Zeno had to stoop to get into the door, which he was used to by now, and entered the 'waiting' area of the dojo. The place hadn't changed much since he saw it last: same white walls various Japanese dÃ©cor adorning them, the training floor itself made of wood covered by some kind of rubber material. This made the floor firm enough for practice, but provided some cushion to keep trainees from hurting themselves too much when they hit the floor. A feature that Zeno thought was counterproductive when came to making people stronger, but he dared not speak that opinion here.

Yamasheto himself must have gone into his office, for he was not out on the floor itself. Zeno knew better then to call out though, so he patiently waited for the sensei to emerge. Sani was getting more and more antsy, so Zeno put a hand on his shoulder to calm him.

Finally, Yamasheto emerged: a short, for a human, slightly dark, older male with a crop of short black hair and brown eyes. He was wearing a black T-shirt with white pants of similar style to a _gi_, with a black cloth belt tied around his waist. Yamasheto noticed them almost immediately.

"Ah, Mister Dummy, you come back," Yamasheto said, a big grin on his face.

"Aye, Sensei," Zeno replied. "I have a favor to ask."

"A favor?" The humans grin turned into a faint scowl. "I don't recall owing any favors to you. More Elite arrogance?"

"Please, Sensei, hear me out first, it is for a good cause."

"Speak then, and quickly, Mister Dummy, so I know whether or not I should kick your rear out of my dojo."

"This is Sani 'Hilvum," Zeno said, stepping aside and gesturing to Sani, whom looked down shyly as he waved. "He has a problem I am certain you have heard a lot of as a reason to come train under you, Sensei."

"And that reason is?"

Zeno took a moment to figure out what words to say. He did not know how Yamasheto viewed semos, so he wanted to avoid that label to be on the safe side. "A controlling bully, that likes to use his, larger size and greater strength to his advantage."

"I do not understand," Yamasheto said, folding his arms but his face no longer had a scowl. "You people are all big and strong. Why would he have such problems?"

"While my people do focus on agility along with strength in our own training, Sani's bloodline is naturally smaller and weaker than most. Plus, we do not train in the ways of using your opponent's strength and momentum against him. Such techniques I feel would help Sani greatly in dealing with this bully."

Yamasheto didn't speak for a moment, looking to be in thought. "How big is this bully?" he asked.

Before Zeno could respond, Sani lifted up his hand, palm flat, up to about the height of Zeno's upper mandibles. He then touched Zeno's shoulders with both hands and spread his hands away, obviously indicating shoulder width and thus, Runi's greater bulk. Hopefully, Yamasheto understood the gestures.

"Are you mute, Sani?" Yamasheto asked, though his tone was curious, not hostile. When Sani shook his head, he added. "Then speak!"

"Forgive him, Sensei," Zeno interjected. "Sani does not know English, only our native Sangheilian. I gave him a translator so he may understand your words, but he cannot speak them in turn. I am going to teach him the language, when I can."

"Well, all he will need to speak is 'yes, sensei' and 'no, sensei'."

"So this means you will train him?"

"You may be a dummy lizard, but you bring him to the right place. Come onto the floor."

"Yes, sensei." Zeno bowed before stepping onto the training floor, Sani copying his motions.

"Now, Mister Dummy, from Sani's description of this bully of his, you be perfect for demo."

"Ohâ€¦lovelyâ€¦." Zeno grumbled, wincing at the pain and humiliation he was no doubt going to be receiving in a few moments.

"Sani," Yamasheto continued. "Look at Mister Dummy and myself. Who would you think would win a fight?"

Sani looked conflicted for a moment, then blushed, turning his head away slightly before pointing at Zeno.

"Oy! Look me in the eye and speak your answer, Sani. Dummy will translate if he has to."

The timid male took a moment, but at last he looked directly at Yamasheto and said. "Zeno, sensei."

"Ah, what are you judging this on? Size?"

"Yes, sensei."

"Size not always determine the outcome of a battle. I show you." Yamasheto turned toward Zeno: Zeno already knew what was coming. "Mister Dummy, attack me. Don't care how."

Meeting the floor in 3â€|2â€| Zeno thought as he threw a punch. Next thing he knew the room spun and he was now looking at the ceiling. _Yep, hello floor._ He looked up at Sani, who had a look of surprise on his face.

"H-how did youâ€|.?" Sani started sputtering in Sangheilian, but went into incoherent babbling.

"Calm down, Sani," Zeno told him as he got back to his feet. "Sensei, he asks how you did that."

"I didn't need a translation for that, Dummy," Yamasheto chided. "Meaning was obvious. Sani, what I did was energy redirection. I used the energy in his momentum and weight to power my throw: I use his own energy against him."

Sani still looked surprised, but Zeno could see interest now in those yellow-green eyes. "Canâ€|can I see more, Sensei?" he asked.

After he translated, Zeno saw Yamasheto's face light up with a mischievous grin. Zeno knew he was going to be meeting the floor many more times todayâ€|.

* * *

><p>AN:** I mentioned this in a DA journal the other day, but I know not everyone here looks at my DA page so I'll repeat it here. Starting next week, _Duel Hearts_ will be posted on Tuesdays and Fridays. Yes, this means the last of the series, titled _Untold Truths_, has been completed. There will be no delay in-between story arcs this time!

6. The Final Pieces

**Authors Note:** Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 5: The Final Pieces

Sani watched with awe as Yamasheto demonstrated several more types of throws, each time Zeno's own strength was being used against him. He was starting to see how this could help him: Runi can't hurt him if he ended up on the floor every time he tried to hit him. It looked so easyâ€|.

It would turn out to be not so easy once Yamasheto slowed it down to show the steps in the various throws. While some were simple, others had a number of steps to them to execute. Sani started to doubt he would get the hang of it by the time the _Shadow of Intent_ arrived. Doubt that started to disappear once he got a chance to try it for himself.

An hour after the lesson started, Sani was getting the basics down. Yamasheto told him it would be a good idea for him to learn another things along with the throws, a sentiment Zeno agreed with. Zeno said something about not wanting him to be a 'one trick pony', whatever that meant. Sani decided it was a good idea anyway: the more tools he had to use against Runi, the better.

When the lesson was over, it was decided that Sani would come for training three days a week, between the morning and lunch classes. Once that was set up, they left the dojo.

"Hmmâ€|With all that has gone on, I just realized we missed lunch," Zeno said. "I am hungry."

"Same," Sani agreed, feeling a familiar ache in his stomach.

"Well, it is only a little bit out of the way to get there, I would say we grab a bite at the food court to tie us over until dinner."

"Oh!" Sani remembered the food court. He had sampled many of the different food stuffs there, especially of one type. "Is the ice cream parlor still there?"

"Hmm?" Zeno had this small, curious smile on his face. "I believe so. Never fancied ice cream myself to be honest. I take it you do?"

Sani vigorously nodded. "Though, I must admit it does not like _me_ in turn," he said with a slight blush. "I end up stinking up the restroom later on."

"Ah, lactose intolerant I see, thanks for the fair warning: I will be sure to wear my air tight helmet whenever you have some." Sani giggled at that. "But...I would highly suggest eating something else today, considering you are still recovering from your trip here."

"Yeahâ€|I guess you are correct," Sani said with a sigh.

The place Zeno decided to get food from was one Sani hadn't seen before: either it was new or he just hadn't noticed it before on his previous visits. The food was good though, which consisted of human-bite sized pieces of chicken and beef cooked in a slightly sweet sauce. They ate in silence, then returned to Zeno's quarters.

The rest of the day was rather boring. Zeno had to look through some documents relating to his ambassador duties, so Sani spent the time flipping through TV channels, wondering what strange shows the humans watched. After dinner was much the same, before Sani decided to turn in for the night. As he curled up into the warm blankets after washing up, he was fully expecting a peaceful sleep like he had the night before.

It was not to be.

* * *

><p>Like last night, Zeno checked to see if Sani fell asleep alright shortly after he went to bed. He didn't know why he did so,

considering he and Sani were the only ones in the suite. Well, one could count Sesai if someone wanted to be technical about it, since the AI was everywhere on the station. Once satisfied that Sani was asleep, Zeno turned his attention back to the documents he had been deciphering all afternoon.

Why can't they just write these things in plain English? Zeno grumbled, rubbing his brow. It was a running joke among the less politically connected humans that they only speak and write in 'legalese'. It wasn't an official language, more like a means of writing that, to Zeno, was meant to ensure the common folk would get easily confused trying to make sense of it. Zeno learned early on that it was a way for the less sincere politicians to trick people into agreeing with them and now Zeno had to be sure he got it right so his own people didn't fall for the trick. It was taxing, headache inducing work.

He finally decided to call it for the night, figuring he could finish it off in the morning. With a yawn, he got up and stretched before heading to his own room. While in the shower, he thought he heard something, but after pausing to listen a moment he heard nothing so shrugged it off. When he stepped back into the bedroom after drying off, he immediately saw something amiss.

Something was in his bed and it was moving. No, trembling and it was roughly Sangheili shaped if one looked carefully. That meant only one thing.

"Sani?" Zeno called out softly. Sure enough, Sani's head poked out from under the covers, his eyes wide with fear. His first instinct was to demand why he was in his bed, but he checked himself. Something had spooked the smaller male, spooked him bad enough to want to come in here where he would feel safer. "What is wrong?" he asked. "Something wake you up?"

Sani nodded slightly as Zeno sat on the bed next to him. Immediately, Sani wrapped his arms around him, whimpering softly. Feeling awkward, Zeno hesitantly rubbed his back. "Hey, it is alright," he said softly. "What spooked you so badly?"

"Dream," Sani whimpered.

"A dream? Sounds more like a nightmare. Nightmares cannot hurt you."

"It wasn't just a nightmare but a memory."

"Of?"

"What caused me to finally run away."

"Something Runi did to you then." Sani just nodded. "Did you want to try to talk about it?"

Sani seemed hesitant at first, but then sighed in resignation. He let go of him and sat up, looking apprehensive, as if he worried Runi would bust in and hurt him for telling him. "You already know that he abused me both physically and mentally, all to control everything I do," Sani said softly, Zeno nodded even though it wasn't a question. "To my shame, I had been getting used to it, accepting it as the

norm, especially since there was little my superiors could do, if they bothered at all."

"Then he must have said or did something that made you snap, made you realize you could not live like that," Zeno said.

Sani nodded and started telling him what happenedâ€|

* * *

><p>Sani had just returned from the showers, hoping to get some peace before Runi returned from his duties. To his dismay, Runi came into the room moments later, a wide grin on his face. "There you are, Sani, I have an idea you will like," Runi said.

"_What sort of prank this time?" Sani said, almost not succeeding in keeping a tone of dread and annoyance from his voice._

"_Oh no, not a prank this time," Runi said cheerfully, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, to which Sani tensed. "I was thinking it was high time to visit your keep the next time we stop at Sanghelios. I know you miss your friends and family there. Would they not be happy to see us as a happy couple?"_

Sani stiffened, his eyes wide. To return to his keep on the pretense he was 'happy' with this arrangement sickened him. More than the pranks, or everything else Runi did to him, or forced him to do. A spark of something he thought died weeks ago reignited: the resolve to fight back.

"_No," Sani said softly, his hands clenching._

"_What was that?" Runi asked, his tone one more of confusion than anything else, which gave Sani more momentum._

"_I said 'no'." Sani knocked his arm off his shoulder, turning around to face him. "We are not a couple, never have been and never will be! I refuse to return to my keep stating such a blatant lie! If I go to visit my keep it will be __**without you**__!"_

_Runi continued to look shocked, but once Sani's tirade was done, his expression quickly turned dark. Though Sani expected it, he found he was not prepared for the pain that came nextâ€|. _

* * *

><p>"It was the worst beating I had ever receivedâ€|," Sani said, wiping a tear from his cheek. "And he did not just assault me with his fists eitherâ€|noâ€|he used his 'special punishment'."<p>

"Which isâ€|?" Zeno wasn't sure if he wanted to know.

"He would tie me to the bed and then rape me repeatedly," Sani said through clenched mandibles.

"By the godsâ€|and you are notâ€|.?"

"I am _sebo_â€|soâ€|one could say it is not as bad as if I was 'normal', but stillâ€|." Sani shuddered as he said. "The beating was so bad that I had to spend two days in the infirm and I knew then

that if I did not get out somehow, he may kill me one day." He wrapped his arms around Zeno once more, though this time Zeno didn't mind considering what was just revealed. "I did not want to spend the rest of my life with him, living a lieâ€|and in fear that each day may be my last at his hands."

"Your will to live is strongâ€|and thus you found your way here, where you will be safe."

"But only until the _Shadow of Intent_ arrivesâ€|," Sani reminded him.

"Sani, I said I would look at every angle to find a way to keep you from him and I mean that. Even if I have to make something up to do so at risk of my own career." He cupped his hand under Sani's head and lifted it gently. "You are too sweet a person to be forced to go back to that situation."

Sani blushed faintly. "You are so good to me, Zenoâ€|Iâ€|I wish I had met you long agoâ€|."

Zeno chuckled at that and patted him on the back. "You should try to go back to sleep, Sani. It is rather late."

"Canâ€|can I sleep here tonight? Itâ€|reminds me of homeâ€|."

The request caught Zeno by surprise. "Ha-how so?"

"It is another _oddity_ about my keep," Sani explained. "Those that are not married or sick sleep in communal beds."

Zeno's eyes widened at that. "You mean, a bunch of you share one large bed?"

Sani nodded. "Pretty much. Up to fifteen per bed, males and females sleep in separate ones. Some say it is a habit we got from our ancestors when they were slaves. A means of comfort and warmth during that era." Sani lowered his head. "Itâ€|it has been a long time since I truly felt both."

Zeno hesitated: the last time he slept with anyone was with Miko, just before the Schism started. While he longed for the comfort of another, he feared betraying Miko's memory. He wanted to say no, that it was inappropriate for a couple of near-strangers to do this, yet Sani said himself that it wasn't considered inappropriate for his keep. Zeno looked into Sani's pleading yellow-green eyes and found he just could not say no to him.

"Alrightâ€|," he said with a faint sigh. "But let us try not to make a habit out of this OK?"

Sani's face lit up. "Thank you, Zeno! I will try not to take up too much space."

Zeno simply nodded and returned to the bathroom, grabbing a pair of shorts along the way. Normally he slept nude, but he wasn't about to do so with another male sharing his bed. After making himself decent, he returned and crawled under the sheets himself.

It felt a bit awkward, having someone you weren't intimate within the

same bed, but Zeno knew he had to deal with it for the night. There wasn't much room, but somehow he managed to get comfortable, all too aware of the body heat coming from Sani next to him. Sani himself seemed to have fallen asleep already, a faint smile on his face. With another faint sigh, Zeno closed his eyes, not expecting to fall asleep quickly tonight.

He was rather surprised when he did.

* * *

><p>Zeno was already up by the time Sani awoke himself. At first Sani was confused, wondering why he was in Zeno's bed but then he remembered the events of last night. He felt guilty for intruding on Zeno's space like that, but that had been truly the best night's sleep he had in a long time. Still, he felt he should apologize, so he got up and was greeted by the smell of breakfast when he walked out the door.<p>

"Good morning," Zeno said, glancing briefly up at him from eating. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did," Sani replied. "I am sorry for intruding on you like that."

Zeno was already shaking his head. "You did what you felt you needed to do, Sani and I am here to help you however I can, after all. Come, your breakfast is getting cold."

Sani nodded and joined him at the table, grateful Zeno wasn't holding his actions against him. As usual the food looked good and bacon looked like it was a lot more edible this time. As he ate, he noted Zeno seemed a bit distracted. "Something on your mind?" Sani asked when he was nearly done eating.

Zeno looked up at him, a hint of curiosity in his eyes. "Yes, there is something that puzzles me," he said after a brief moment.

"What is that?"

"Rtas said that you two knew each other for awhile prior to joining the military, was he always like this?"

"No, he was not. In fact when I first met him, he was so shy and timid himself, afraid even. He seemed like the last person to do such a thing."

"Really? What caused him to change?"

"I am not sure what did, or when it started."

"Why not start at the beginning then, how did you two meet?"

Sani sighed and thought back, recalling the event that started it all.

* * *

><p>Sanghelios,

2551, State of Hilvum

Sani wrapped his cloak about himself tighter, guarding himself from the brief chill of the breeze that had started to blow. Winter was fast approaching and soon the ut'su herds will need to be put into the pens for the brief Sanghelios winter. From the chill in the air and the position of the suns, Sani guessed by week's end the herds will be winterized. The herdsmaster would know for certain though as it was not Sani's place to make such judgment. Someday though, he may take the herdsmaster's place, a prospect that made him smile.

"_Sani," a familiar voice called out behind him. Sani turned to see the herdsmaster, his beloved uncle, approaching. "How are you holding up?"_

"_Supmus me'yu (spirits bless you), herdsmaster," Sani responded. "I am fine. I can watch the herd for a few more hours, in fact."_

The herdsmaster chuckled kindly. "We have plenty of herders for the duty, so there is no need to push yourself, Sani." He patted him on the back. "Go on in and warm up, I will watch this herd for the last shift."

"_As you wish, herdsmaster, though you are sure 'you' can handle it?" Sani grinned cheekily._

"_Bah! I may be growing in years, but I can still watch the herd as long as you cheeky youngins," the herdsmaster was grinning himself. "Now go on, before I have to give you a poke with the staff."_

Sani stood there for a moment, still grinning, until the herdsmaster playfully swung his herdsman staff at him. With a playful yelp, Sani jumped away from the swing and started to jog away, giggling. He didn't get far when he thought he spotted something in the distance. Squinting, he tried to make out what it was, but it was obscured by a bunch of bushes. He knew he shouldn't approach whatever it was on his own: it was one of the rules of herding that was drilled into his head since he joined the Ses'sora.

"_Herdsmaster!" he called back. "I think there is something in the bushes!"_

Sani did not look back to see his uncle's expression, but he heard the man call out to a couple of other herders to watch their herd for the moment. After a moment, the herdsmaster was by his side and Sani pointed in the direction he saw the thing. "Yes, I see it too now, Sani," the herdsmaster said. "My eyes must be starting to go out if I missed seeing that on the way here." After a brief pause he added. "No commenting on that, ya hear?"

"_Would not dream of it, herdsmaster," Sani replied, though he had a smirk on his face._

"_Come, let us see what this is. It cannot have been there long, for the Tal would have seen it on their last pass."_

"_If their eyes were not going out that is," Sani said cheekily._

"_Warso! What did I do to deserve such cheeky youth?"_

"_We keep you on your toes, do we not?"_

Yes,â€|yes you do indeed," the herdsman sighed.

_They approached the area with caution, their herdsman staffs held in a ready position. For all they knew it could be a ka'ur laying in wait, hoping to ambush an ut'su that wandered too close, or a careless Sangheili. As they drew closer, they started to make out more of the unknown objects shape and were able to determine it was a Sangheili. Moving more quickly now, but with no less caution, they reached the prone figure moments later. _

It as a young male, looking to be about Sani's age, with red-brown skin and clothing more suited for the hotter times of year. He looked thin and apparently collapsed here due to exhaustion and exposure to the elements. The herdsman cautiously reached down and felt for a pulse.

He was still alive.

* * *

><p>"That was Runi?" Zeno asked.<p>

"Aye," Sani confirmed. "Between the herdsman and myself, we were able to carry him inside."

"I am surprised you took such a risk," Zeno stated. "Those wandering the no-man's land between keeps are usually outcasts, criminals, and exiles."

"We did check for Marks and found none. Still, we called the Tal to inform them of his presence and they sent over a member to keep guard over him until his status was confirmed. Seeing I was the one that discovered him, I was tasked with his care until the investigation on his character was completed."

"Do you treat all visitors like that?"

"Only the ones that come in unannounced." Sani smirked slightly. "Though even announced ones are watched: we had incidents where visitors started becoming belligerent and demeaning toward us after they discover our history."

"What do you consider 'announced'?"

"When they arrive on scheduled transports."

"Ah, should have guessed that, I must be slipping in my old ageâ€|."

He giggled at that. "It was a few hours before he came to," he continued. "When he saw where he was, he looked frightened, like he was expecting us to harm him. It took a bit of reassuring to get him to calm down enough to even give us his given name. He was not forthcoming about his keep name, however."

"That surely sent some red flags up in your heads."

"It did initially until he finally told us he was a Goturn. When asked why he was so far away from his keep, he simply said that it was not safe for him there anymore."

"A self-exile then, most likely," Zeno said. "But there are a lot of reasons someone could go into self-exile: a criminal act being one of them."

"We were unable to get out of him exactly why he felt unsafe," Sani said. "But from his behavior, the council deemed him non-threatening to us and allowed him to stay."

"Just on his behavior?"

"His body language told us he carried a lot of guilt and regret, even sorrow. Whatever it was he did, it felt bad about and on that basis alone the council decided to give him a second chance with us."

"A decision they likely regret now, once they heard about what he did to you."

"Yesâ€|most likely."

"Did he ever tell you why he left his keep?"

"No, never. No one from his keep went came looking for him either."

"Which does not help us in figuring out why he started treating you like that."

"I knowâ€|," Sani suddenly sat up straight as it dawned on him.

"What is it?"

"I think I know why nowâ€|."

* * *

><p>It was turning out to be a productive day, at least when it came to solving the mysteries that surrounded Sani. This next part should fill in a lot of holes in the puzzle of Sani's life and why he ended up coming here. Zeno waited patiently while Sani figured out where to start once more.<p>

"Shortly after we found him, Runi went into a major depression period," Sani began. "It became clear he was mourning a loss of some kind, but he would never tell us of what or for whom. I comforted him the best I could, but sometimes it felt like I was not even there."

"It must have been something very dear to him that he lost," Zeno said softly.

"Indeed. Shortly before the schism started, he broke out of his depression and started acting like a productive member of the keep. Yet I could tell he still was not truly happy. That changed when the schism started and we were drafted."

"What happened?"

"While we were in training, another trainee,â€|What was his nameâ€|ahâ€|Quoy 'Tolehâ€|started to flirt with him. He was hesitant at first, I remember him asking me if he should risk it. I had told him any chance to be happy was worth it. So he did start accepting Quoy's advances and I saw him happy for the first time since I found him."

"I have a feeling it was not to lastâ€|," Zeno muttered.

"Noâ€|," Sani confirmed, shaking his head. "Just before our first battle, I overheard Quoy mentioning that they should consummate their relationship after victory was won, Runi agreed. Butâ€|"

"Quoy did not survive the battle."

Sani nodded sadly. "He must not have seen him fall during the battle itself, as he waited in the hanger for hours, expecting each phantom that came in to have Quoy onboard. One did finally arrive with his corpseâ€|." Sani sighed before continuing. "Runi was devastated by the loss: he did not speak for nearly a week. Again, I comforted him the best I could, but the worst was yet to come."

"Was that whenâ€|"

"No, not yet. A major domo, Higo I think his name was, started wooing him. I did not like the looks of him, so I warned him against it. However Runi was desperate for love and accepted Higo's advances. As I feared, it turned out Higo was only using him for a cheap thrill, a plaything. Once he grew tired of Runi, he dumped him: itâ€|shattered what was left of Runi's spirit."

"I think I see now," Zeno said, piecing it together in his head. "Since you were the one constant in his life, he sought to protect you, or something similar. Only his paranoia of losing you ended up turning him into a monster."

"That is largely it, yes," Sani said, nodding. "Itâ€|does make you sympathetic considering what history we know about himâ€|butâ€|."

"It does not excuse him for what has done," Zeno said with a faint growl.

"Noâ€|." After a brief moment Sani asked. "Zenoâ€|do you think there is a chance he can be redeemed?"

Zeno sighed as he mulled over the question. "I do not know. If there is, it will take a lot of workâ€|and luckâ€|considering his mental state now. I am more concerned about you right now though: once you are taken care of, then we can possibly see about helping Runi."

Sani nodded in agreement.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 6: Tears

Later that day, Zeno and Sani dressed up to go out for dinner. Zeno was having trouble shaking certain aspects of Runi's history, how he had lost someone he loved, yet refused to really talk to anyone about it. It felt like it was familiar, but he couldn't place it. With a shake of his head, Zeno cast it out of his mind as unimportant and finished getting changed.

He stepped out of the bedroom and stepped toward Sani's room to see if he was ready yet. Sani must not have insured the door was completely closed, as it was open a crack. Before he could stop himself, Zeno took a peek and blinked in mild surprised.

Miko? He thought in puzzlement at the nearly fully nude figure in the room. Zeno shook his head and when he looked again he saw Sani instead. _Not againâ€|,_ Zeno thought in despair, stepping away. Unbidden, memories rushed to the surface, threatening to send him spiraling down into an emotional wreck. _Please, not hereâ€|not nowâ€|._ But no matter how hard he tried though, he could not push them back, could not lock them away. It did not help that Sani naturally bore some resemblance to Miko.

He couldn't let Sani see him like this, so he went to the first secluded place in the residence that he could think of to give him a chance to recompose himselfâ€|.

* * *

><p>Sani finished dressing and stepped into the living room, only to his surprise Zeno was not out there waiting for him. Strange, I could have sworn I heard him leave his room a moment ago, he thought. The homestead seemed unnaturally quiet as well, like he was the only one in the place. Unnerved and a little worried, he started searching for Zeno. He checked Zeno's bedroom first, but it was empty. While the restroom door was open it proved to be empty as well. No Zeno in the kitchen either. He was about to assume Zeno had left the residence completely when he found him viewing room that served as a pseudo-balcony.

The Zeno he found was not the proud, confident man he had come to know.

He was sitting on the bench, his right elbow on the armrest, his hand over his eyes. His expression and body posture showed a man in some form of distress: it looked like he was desperately trying to hold back tears. Tears of what though?

Sani remembered the briefing he got before he left his keep after he was drafted, a warning really, about how most Sangheili considered showing tears, or to admit to be in pain, to be a sign of weakness.

It was a stark contrast to his own keep's views, where members could count on coming to each other for comfort if they needed it, no matter the source of discomfort.

It was those views that came to the forefront now: he wanted to comfort Zeno. Zeno was obviously in some form of pain and after all he had done for him so far, Sani wanted to give back a little of that kindness. But would Zeno accept it? Many Sangheili he had encountered were very arrogant, full of pride and would never accept such comfort. Zeno proved to be one of the more humble Sangheili he had met, but that he had hid himself away told Sani that he did have some of that foolish pride that was widespread among their people.

Yet, Sani found he could not walk away and leave the man in peace. "Zeno?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

Zeno's head snapped up and around to look at him, his eyes wide with a hint of terror within. Though the light was dim, Sani could see a hint of tears in his eyes. "Saniâ€¦Iâ€¦," Zeno said, looking at a loss for words for a moment. "Itâ€¦it is nothing, nothing you can help with, at least."

Yeah right, Sani thought as he approached and sat down beside him. "I doubt that," he said softly. "You have helped me a lot the last few days, Zeno, let me at least do something for you in turn. What has caused you so much distress?"

"Saniâ€¦I do not want to hurt youâ€¦".

He was a bit confused at that and a little worried. "Was it something Iâ€¦".

"It is nothing you can help, Sani. You cannot change what you look likeâ€¦".

"I do not understand."

Zeno was silent for a long moment, looking out the window and into space. Finally, he said. "Youâ€¦bear some resemblance to someone I once knew, someone I lovedâ€¦someone Iâ€¦lostâ€¦".

Zeno's eyes closed and his breath was now shaky, as if the very mention of it still pained him greatly. Sani understood now: the loss of a loved one was almost always hard on the ones left behind. "Who was this person?" he asked, hoping it wasn't too sensitive a question.

* * *

><p>It was indeed a sensitive question for him.<p>

Zeno looked at Sani, whom looked at him expectantly with those bright, yellow-green eyes of his. There was no hint of judgment, only understanding. Zeno realized that he never did talk to anyone about Miko's death and what he meant to him, not fully anyway. He either didn't have the chance, or had a lack of people he trusted to talk to about it. Or he ran away from them: he mentally winced at the memory of what he did to Henun.

Yet, here was Sani, a man he barely knew, whom had his own troubles

to worry about, wanting to help him. Was it in repayment for what he had done for Sani so far? Or something else? He did not know. But he did know that he really needed to talk to someone about this.

After a long moment and a deep sigh, he finally said, turning his head away. "Miko 'Kemotee,â€|he was my lover."

"Ohâ€|," Sani said, his eyes widening slightly at the revelation. "What happened to him?"

"Brute got him at the start of the Schismâ€|Iâ€|I could not save himâ€|."

"Sounds like he meant a lot to youâ€|," Sani said, placing his hand gently upon his.

"Yesâ€|," Zeno admitted, the memories all rushing back once more. "Heâ€|saved me on that planet I told you about before, taught me how to accept myself for what I amâ€|so much more. Iâ€|got this to remember him by." He rubbed the tattoo. "As I had nothing of his due to all that happened during the Schism, yetâ€|it did not seem to ease the pain of his loss muchâ€|.He still haunts me, even now."

There was a moment of silence before Sani spoke up. "Soâ€|he has been gone for about four years?" Zeno nodded. "Did you ever grieve for him properly?"

"Noâ€|." Zeno's eyes widened when he realized that.

"That is why he still haunts you."

"I do notâ€|."

"My uncle once told me that to keep your emotions bottled up, especially ones like sorrow, will only cause you more pain in the end. They keep building up more and more pressure, until it finally breaks, crushing and drowning you all at once, leaving only a broken shell behind," Sani explained. "Miko's spirit must know you have yet to fully grieve for him; he knows you are slowly destroying yourself by not doing so. That is why he seems to haunt you; he wants you to release all the grief and sorrow before it destroys you."

It made a surprising amount of sense to him, but he was hesitant. "But, I need to be strong for youâ€|I cannotâ€|."

"Zeno, I am a Hilvum: we do not subscribe to the foolish notion that showing so-called weak emotions such as sorrow in public as being shameful. We do not, I do not, care if you break down into tears in front of me. In fact, I would be more than willing to give you what comfort you need while you let it all out."

"You would be willing toâ€|."

"Hivum, Zenoâ€|It is in my nature."

Zeno thought back, way back, to when he learned of Kou's death. He barely knew Miko then and was still not fully accepting of his status of being a semo, yet he allowed Miko to comfort him. Why was he having so much difficulty allowing himself to grieve in

near-strangers arms now? Frustrated with himself, he rose and wandered to his bedroom.

"Zeno?" He heard Sani get up and follow him. Zeno didn't turn around to acknowledge him: he was trapped on the verge of letting go of all those tears he held back for so long, yet something was still holding them back.

Suddenly, a pair of arms wrapped around his torso, squeezing him in a gentle embrace. He could feel the heat of Sani's body against his back, the slightly tickling feeling of his breath on his skin. "I am here for you," Sani's soft voice whispered to him.

That did it. The gates opened. First a single tear fell, followed by a couple more. Shortly after it was a torrentâ€¦

* * *

><p>Circular room, heavy iron door, stone wallsâ€¦

Oh no, not this again, he thought, turning around. Sure enough, he saw the amorphous blob behind him, its long tentacles reaching for him. He pressed himself against the wall, trying fruitlessly to keep away from it. Why did he even bother? It got him no matter what he didâ€¦.

He became aware of something very hot on his skin. Then pain.

"_Yeouch!" He yelped when he realized he had bumped into one of the torches on the wall. The bump dislodged it from the rotting holder and it clattered to the floor, close to part of the blob. The blob then 'shrieked' as if in pain, the part of it that was too close to the fire moving away. It is afraid of fireâ€¦ he realized, picking up the dropped torch, hope rising in his breast._

For the first time, he went on the offensive, waving the torch in front of him, driving back the blob. It seemed faster now, trying to avoid the flame, but he eventually struck it once, then twice and several times more. The last blow must have been critical, as suddenly it started gushing water from a burnt hole he had made upon its surface. This water splashed against his feet as it spread across the floor, the blob shrinking in the process. Eventually, the blob was only the size of a basketball: harmless to him now, as it quickly oozed under the iron door, leaving a wet trail behind it.

Yet that was not all it left behind.

In the middle of the room, now revealed by the light of the torch he held, was a key. Picking it up, he noticed the end of the key had the same shape as the symbol on the padlock. Quickly he strode to the iron door and put it inside the padlock. With a twist, the lock snapped open and fell to the floor with a thud.

With a joyous cry, he opened the doorâ€¦

* * *

><p>Zeno yawned as he stirred, a part of him not wanting to awaken, for he felt so warm. He purred softly, savoring the warmth, a kind of

warmth he hadn't felt in a long time, one that he had badly missed. As his mind awakened, however, he became aware of the source of this warmth: it had its own heart beats, its own scent

a scent he knew.

He bolted upright and looked down, confirming with his eyes what his other senses were telling him. Sani was in his bed, again, and he had been using him like a warm pillow. _How did_ Question in his mind died before it could be completed when he remembered the events of last night. Sani finding him alone and despondent, talking to him about letting go all the sorrow.

By the gods, I must have been crying all night, he thought, realizing just how swollen and puffy his face felt.

"Good morning," Sani said, now awake himself. "How do you feel?"

Zeno had think a moment. "Relieved," he said softly. "Is the best word I can think of to describe how I feelH-how long did I?"

"Hours," Sani replied simply.

"And you held me all that time?"

The smaller Sangheili nodded, a faint smile on his face: a smile that made him feelhe couldn't describe it. "You finally fell asleep around midnight, I think," Sani said. "But I did not want to let you go even then, for even in your sleep you still wept. ThatThat had been a lot of tears you have been holding back, all this time."

"Yes, yes it was." Zeno recalled the dream, how he finally found a way to fight back against the blob and all the water that it spilled. Was the release of his grief and the blob related? Or was it just a coincidence? He shook his head, unable to make sense of it. Then both their stomachs rumbled loudly in protest. "Oh blood, we never did eat dinner did we?"

"No. Guess we should have an extra large breakfast to make up for it eh?"

Zeno chuckled as he pulled himself out of bed, Sani doing the same. "Yeah, I guess we should."

Fortunately the diner they had planned to go to last night served breakfast as well. As they ate, Zeno couldn't help but notice how much _lighter_ he felt, like a weight was lifted off his hearts. _And it was thanks to Sani,_ he thought, looking across the table at him. He knew he still had a way to go before he could truly move on however. Plus whether or not the change in the nightmare had any significance still bugged him. He wasn't sure who to talk to about that kind of thing though.

Later, shortly after doing some minor ambassador related stuff, he came across his old friend Luke. "Luke! How are you doing? ONI still treating you well?" he asked, patting the human on the back.

"Zeno!" Luke said, coughing from the blow. "Not so hard. Humans are not as tough as you Sangheili."

"Ah, that is right, sorry," Zeno said with a smirk.

"Anyway, I am fine, save for the new bruise you just gave me. I heard about the stowaway you took under your armâ€¦."

"Sani? Yeah. A young man in a situation he did not know how to get himself out of. I decided to help him out."

"You know the security guys are still grumbling about it, right?"

"They can kiss my scaly ass."

"Rightâ€¦lovely mental image thereâ€¦."

Zeno laughed at that, but then turned serious. "Luke, how much do you know about dreams, as inâ€¦what they may mean?"

"Dreams? Depends," the blond haired human said. "Most mean nothing as it's just busy work your brain does while you sleep. Some, according to so-called 'experts', can have meaning, especially if they are reoccurring."

"This one was definitely reoccurring, with little change to it until last night." Zeno then gave Luke a brief description of the dream, how it usually went and how it ended last night. "I wonder because also last night, I wept heavily for the first time in years for someone I lost."

Luke looked thoughtful for a moment. "There is an old saying that went something along the lines of 'drowning in your sorrows', but I think that usually refers to drinking while you are depressedâ€¦."

"Well I did do just that after being woken up by that nightmare," Zeno grumbled.

"Naughty, Zeno, that is bad for you ya know?"

"Humph, your drinks do not have nearly enough kick in them to cause me any harm."

"Rightâ€¦anyway, the two events, the dream and the crying do seem to be related, though it is certainly not a reoccurring dream I have ever heard of before. It sounds more like a dream you'd have after watching a bad monster movie while eating stale popcorn."

"I have to agree with you thereâ€¦."

"Probably has to do with you being an alien and all, you know? Usually we humans have reoccurring dreams that have to do with falling continuously, being chased, teeth falling out of your mouthâ€¦those kinds of things."

"You humans have weird dreams. Just what do those mean?"

"I think the teeth one has to do with money, but do not hold me to

that."

"Moneyâ€|how the heck does that relate to teeth in any fashion?"

"Well if you knew how much those damn dentist's charged to work on your teeth, I think you'd see why."

"Makes me glad my kind have no _need_ for dentists to begin with."

"Lucky bastard." Luke paused for a moment, then added with a cheeky grin. "Though that explains why your breath always reeks."

"Hey!"

* * *

><p>That nightâ€|

He thought he was done with this place, but apparently there was more to it, for he found himself in a new room after stepping through the door.

This one was rectangular in shape and had alcoves carved into the stone wall on either side. In these alcoves were weights of various shapes and sizes. Barring the way forward, like the first, was a heavy iron door with a strong padlock locking it. _This time, the lock had a green symbol in the shape similar to the weights on the shelves. Next to the door, on the floor was a pressure pad and above the pad, about chest height with him, was a panel._

Obvious, he thought with a smile. I need to find the right weight to put on the pad to open the panel and the key will be inside. Confident that this will be easy, he studied the pressure pad for a moment, noting how it was slightly sunk below the level of the floor and was only roughly a foot and a half square in size.

Then he walked beside the alcoves, studying the weights. He didn't know how much weight was needed to trigger the pad, so he picked one that was small enough to fit on the pad and felt heavy enough to maybe trigger it, then placed it on the pad. Nothing.

OK, no problem, just need to use a heavier weight, he thought, returning the weight to the proper shelf. Picking up another one, he tried again, only to get the same result. Shrugging, he selected another one: again nothing. This is going to take a whileâ€|, he sighed as he put that weight back and selected another one.

This one was rather heavy, making him struggle to put it on the pad. This time though he was rewarded with a click. However, instead of the panel opening like he was expecting, he heard a rumbling noise above him and it was getting louder with each second. Looking up, he saw that the ceiling was literally falling toward him.

"_Fuck!" he cried as he ran for the only safe place he knew: the other room. He managed to roll into the other room just as a large cast iron block crashed into the floor just behind him. The impact was so great, the torches were knocked off the wall, the chains swayed and he was certain he saw a few cracks form in the stone

floor._

_Shaken, he watched as the iron block started to slowly rise back up. Cautiously, he stepped back into room, watching the iron block warily. OK, choosing the wrong one will get me flattened into a Sangheili pancakeâ€¦ he thought, quickly pulling the weight off the pad and setting it aside. He also made careful note where the iron block impacted, seeing that the pressure pad and the door were not in the blocks path. Another place to stand and not get flattened in case he triggered that falling ceiling again. _

Still, this was already proving to be a nerve wracking and tedious puzzle to figure outâ€¦|.

* * *

><p>Zeno woke up with a minor headache, the new dream still fresh in his mind. Dammit, not another one, he thought with a sigh. _If the blob was related to my sorrow, as Luke suggested, what the hell does this one represent?_

He hoped he would figure out this one quicker than the lastâ€¦|.

8. Hashin

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><p>Chapter 7: Hashin

Sani leaned on the railing as he looked out the window, admiring the planet below. It had been a few days since he helped Zeno deal with his grief and he had noticed Zeno seemed more cheerful then before. It made Sani feel happy that he was able to return some of the favor, to give back some of the kindness Zeno has shown him. While the threat of Runi and the Second Master was still there, it felt so far away and Sani was more worried about another little problem that had been growing since he got here.

He was falling in love with Zeno 'Ribal.

Sani didn't know if Zeno was starting to feel the same way toward him or not, but he was certain of his own feelings. He did feel, however, that Zeno was starting to see him as a friend at least, considering the time they spent together: Zeno even had an extra bed put into his room, in case Sani needed to be close to him, which had to mean something. When Zeno wasn't helping him train or learn the human's language, they often just sat around and talked. Zeno was quite interested in his keep, which Sani was happy to tell him more about. In turn, Zeno had started telling him about his exploits, the missions he went on, the pranks he and Miko pulled. Zeno had certainly lead an interesting life.

And now Sani was waiting here in one of the recreation rooms on the station. If he remembered right, this was the very one the Arbiter was nearly killed in by an assassin years ago. It caused a shiver to go up his spine just thinking about it and he hoped Zeno would arrive soon. The ambassador wanted to try a new eatery that had just opened up and Sani was getting hungry.

"Sani 'Hilvum?"

The voice wasn't Zeno's and it wasn't one he recognized either. Turning, he saw an older male Sangheili standing a few feet away. This male had yellow ochre skin, orange eyes, and a chunk of his left brow missing. His attire was Sangheili style civilian clothing, but he spied a suit of light armor underneath it. Sani felt himself tense, his gut telling him that something wasn't right.

"Yes?" he said politely. "Can I help you?"

"I need you to come with me," the man said simply.

"Why? To where? Did the ambassador send you?"

"Second Master Ruro 'Comew has tasked me with your return to the Shadow of the Intent," the man said flatly. "To stand judgment for the desertion of your post."

Sani felt like he was just kicked in the gut. That damn Second Master had sent a hashin after him! "No," Sani said with a growl, starting to edge toward the exit. "I will not go back. The ambassador will not allow it, not after what I have been through."

"The so-called ambassador has no authority here as far as I am concerned," the hashin said with a snort as he started to approach him. "I would suggest coming along willingly, it would be a lot easier on the both of us and I would rather not cause a scene."

The hashin reached out for him and Sani reacted, grabbing his arm and twisting it as he had been taught. With a startled yelp, the man was flipped over. Sani stood there for a brief moment, a bit shocked that he was actually able to pull it off. Then his mind reminded him that he really should run.

Sani turned and bolted, the hashin yelling for him to stop. He knew Zeno would not be happy about this development at all once he found out. That was, of course if he can get to him before the hashin caught himâ€|

* * *

><p>Zeno was running late.<p>

The last meeting took longer than expected and Zeno was only just heading back to his quarters to change. Zeno was half-tempted to meet up with Sani as he was, though he absolutely hated wearing this ambassador armor and didn't like wearing it any longer than he had to. He hoped Sani would understand, though he couldn't think of a reason why not. Hopefully this new eatery would be worth the wait.

"That color clashes so much with your skin tone."

Zeno stopped in his tracks. He did hear what he just heard? Turning, his eyes confirmed the identity of the voice. "Henun!" Zeno said, pleasantly surprised to see his old friend here. Henun looked like he was well, a faint smirk on his face and his yellow-orange eyes as bright as ever. "I see you finally took up on my suggestion to visit Earth to see human art."

"Well, I am officially here on business," the older Sangheili confessed. "But I fully intend to check out the art while I am here."

"Two birds with one stone, as the humans would say. What kind of business are you here for?"

"I was actually hoping you could help out with it, you seeâ€|."

"Ambassador." Sesai suddenly popped up on a console next to him, startling both of them. "There is a situation."

"Hold that thought, Henun, I should see to this," Zeno said apologetically.

"Whaâ€|what is that?" Henun asked.

"Station AI," Zeno replied, turning his attention fully to Sesai. "What is going on, Sesai?"

"Sani is currently being chased around the station by another Elite of unknown intent," the AI said calmly.

Zeno's temper immediately started to flare. "What?" he growled. "I thought it was clear to all stationed Sangheili that Sani was not to be touched. Alert the security teams, I want that man stopped." As he turned to apologize to Henun for the short conversation, he saw that his friend looked panicked. He had a bad feeling he knew why. "You know this man?" Zeno said with a snarl.

"Iâ€|I do," Henun said softly, lowering his head. "I work with himâ€|we are _hashin._"

"What!" Zeno could not believe his ears. "I thought you were going to work in the security field?"

"They rejected me because of my arm," Henun said bitterly. "Please, Zenoâ€|do not hurt Joran! If I had known about Sani being under _your_ protectionâ€|."

"Can you call him off?"

"Iâ€|I can try, but he is the stubborn type."

"Try then. We will need to discuss this after Sani is safe. Sesai, where is Sani now?"

"Running through deck 2, section B, heading toward the marketplace." Sesai replied. Behind him, he heard Henun talking to someone, likely Joran. "Ambassador, they are moving too quickly for the security teams to intercept," Sesai added.

"I will handle it myself then. Can you direct Sani to my location?"

Sesai answered after a brief moment. "Affirmative, ambassador."

"Good. Henun?"

"As I feared, he will not listen," Henun said regretfully.

"Looks like I will have to use physical persuasion then," Zeno grumbled. "I will try not to hurt him _too_ much, Henun."

"Thank youâ€¦".

* * *

><p>He was lost, he just knew it. On top of that Sani felt himself tiring from this prolonged chase, while the hashin behind him was gaining. If he didn't find Zeno or some form of help soonâ€¦|.

No, I will not give up, Sani thought bitterly. _My life was just starting to look up to give up now. I will fight to the death if I have to._

Then strange things started happening. Doors ahead of him started closing, leaving only one possible route to go. When there weren't enough any doors, one of the signs would change into an arrow, indicating which way to go. _Sesai,_ Sani thought, gratefully. _She must be helping me get to Zeno. _He feared it was too little too late though, for he could practically feel the _hashin's_ breath upon his neckâ€¦|.

Suddenly another door slammed shut right behind him and Sani heard a loud curse. Sani could not help but laugh, a laugh that turned into a startled yelp when a pair of hands grabbed him as he entered an open area. By reflex he started struggling.

"Easy, Sani, you are safe now," Zeno's calm voice said.

"Zeno!" Sani cried gratefully, wrapping his arms around the ambassador in a grateful hug. "The-there's aâ€¦|."

"_Hashin_? I know. I will take care of him." Sani noticed the hard edge to Zeno's tone. "Sesai, let him go."

A door opened back in the corridor Sani had just came from and the _hashin_ appeared from behind in, running at full tilt with a rather annoyed expression on his face. Sani slipped behind Zeno as Zeno stepped forward, blacking the man's path. The _hashin_ skidded to a stop, looking none too pleased at the further interference.

"Step aside," the man growled. "I am on official business."

"This Sangheili is under my protection," Zeno hissed.

The _hashin_ snorted, not impressed. "I have had _kaidon's_ give me the same line and I still get my Mark. What makes you any

different?"

"Joran!" a new voice said. "Joran please stand down!"

Sani turned to see another male behind them. The newcomer was a slightly taller Sangheili that was sans his right arm. Who was this guy? Did he work with the _hashin?_

Joran snorted and folded his arms. "Henun, I told you before. I do not give up a chase once it is started. A chase I will resume once mister funky armor gets out of my way."

"That is the Ambassador of Sanghelios," Henun said. "And is in the same unit I was from."

"I care not for his rank, Henun." Joran huffed. "But if he is a friend of yours maybe you can get him to listen to reason."

"Joranâ€¦if you persist in this job, you will forfeit your own life," Henun said flatly. "Zeno does not protect people without a good reason and he is not afraid to main or even kill someone to do so!"

Sani was a bit surprised by that bit of information. He looked up at Zeno and noticed a dark fire in his eyes. A fire that was itching to be released in a torrent: it was a little frightening that the kind, gentle Zeno he knew could be so violent.

"So he is willing to stick his snout in business that is not his to begin with," Joran said with a disgusted huff.

"I made it my business when I learned _why_ Sani did what he did," Zeno growled. "I am surprised you did not bother to do the same."

"I do not care about the motive for a Mark's crimes," Joran sneered.

"Trying to escape from a bad situation is a crime!" Sani exclaimed.

"Cowardice is considered to be so in our society, if you do not remember, kid," Joran said. "

"Same with the desertion of your post."

"I accept that I left without permission, but if you knew half of what I have been thoughâ€¦."

"I told you, I do not _care_ why you committed your crimes, I only care that you receive the punishment you are due."

"Sani has suffered enough," Zeno growled, taking a step forward.

"Joran, please, just back offâ€¦We can talk about it laterâ€¦," Henun said.

"Negotiate? You are kidding right?" Joran laughed briefly, then turned serious once more. "_Hashin_ do not 'negotiate'."

"Then you leave me with no choice," Zeno growled.

Before Joran could react, Zeno rushed toward him and punched him in the face. The hashin staggered back a bit, stunned, and then Zeno grabbed him by the neck and slammed his face into the wall. Joran slumped to the ground, unconscious.

"Joran!" Henun cried, running to him.

"Do not worry, he is just going to have a nasty headache when he wakes up," Zeno said calmly. "Henun, when your friend comes to, met us at the BBQ Bills Steakhouse. Sesai will give you the directions."

"You are inviting them to join us at dinner?" Sani asked as they started to walk away.

"I seriously doubt Joran will attempt to pull anything while in a nice establishment. Most bounty hunters like to minimize innocent causalities whenever possible, I suspect Joran is no different."

"Makes senseâ€|I guessâ€|."

* * *

><p>They stopped by their quarters just long enough for Zeno to change and then headed straight for the steakhouse. There, Zeno requested the VIP room and instructed the greeter to direct Joran and Henun to them. Originally, Zeno had wanted to sit with the rest of the populous, but he did not want to disturb the other patrons with what they were going to be discussing.<p>

Shortly after they got their drinks, the hashin pair arrived. Henun was taking in the western style décor with interest, while Joran just looked very annoyed. "This is humiliatingâ€|." Zeno heard Joran grumble as they sat at the table. "Dining with a Markâ€|."

"If you had listened to me before, this likely would not have happened," Henun chided.

"Oh sure, listen to a rookieâ€|."

"Sometimes those rookies may have insight that is greatly beneficial to your health," Zeno pointed out. "You are lucky Henun begged me to go easy on you, otherwise you would have a lot worse than a headache right now." Joran growled but otherwise did not comment, so Zeno continued. "Now, how did this all come about? Who gave you this job?"

"I can answer that," Sani said softly. "Joran mentioned Second Master Ruro."

"Ughâ€|that asshole. I should have guessed he may try something like this. We know Rtas would never have done this."

"Why? Is he a big softy?" Joran sneered. The looks he got from both Zeno and Henun were so fierce that he actually looked unnerved.

"Rtas 'Vadum isâ€|was in my caseâ€|our commander in Special Operations," Henun said, still glaring at Joran. "We know him very well, and soft he is not."

"Unless you consider actually caring about the wellbeing of your troops as being 'soft'," Zeno added, to which Joran smartly did not comment on that. "Now," Zeno continued. "Henun, I must admit I am surprised: I would have thought you would have checked in on Sani's background before accepting it."

"I wanted to, but Joran would not let me," Henun said with a sigh. "He only wanted me to research on Sani's location."

"It is not our business to know the motive behind a Mark's crime," Joran said flatly.

"Now see, I have a problem with that," Zeno said. "How do you know you are not ending the life of someone that actually did a good thing? How do you know you are not accepting a job from the leader of a criminal element?"

"Please, the official billboard is maintained by the security forces," Joran replied. "No chance of a criminal putting in a bounty on someone's head. As for the other thing, again, it is not my business to know, so long as it pays."

"So as long as you get money, damn the consequencesâ€|."

Joran just shrugged, uncaring.

"I have been working on changing his stance on that, but I am so far unsuccessful in getting through to him," Henun said sadly.

Zeno thought a moment before speaking again. "Alright then, scenario time. A field master is dead, back when we were still part of the Covenant, killed by a fellow Sangheili: do you take the job to avenge his death?"

"Of course," Joran replied.

"Do you check into motive for the murder?"

"Pfft, why should I?"

"Alright, so you find the guilty party and kill him. However there are consequences to this act. Several human bases take longer to find, resulting in a number of planets taking longer to cleanse. During the Schism, the take over of a cruiser does not go as smoothly, maybe even fails, resulting in the likely death of Rtas 'Vadum. Without his leadership in the Separatist Fleet, ship to ship engagements do not go as well, the new human allies having to face more of Truth's troops on the Arc. The rings may have been successfully activated, killing all sentient life. If not though, there are other side effects." Zeno took a sip of his drink before continuing.

"With Rtas dead, the Arbiter may not have made it to the infirmary in time when he was struck by the assassin's bullet. With the Arbiter dead, the war between humanity and Sangheili likely would have

reignited, resulting in the possible destruction of both species."

Both Henun and Sani's eyes were wide, while Joran looked a bit disturbed. "I do not see how letting one murderer live could have prevented all that," Joran said, shaking his head.

"Everything happens for a reason," Zeno said. "Fates and destinies are intertwined. Remove one piece of the puzzle too soon and the consequences can be dire. Of course, unless you are a seer you usually do not see the possible consequences ahead of time, only after, when you can reflect upon the past. I know the likely consequences of this scenario due to my own experience."

"Waitâ€|," Henun said, shocked as it obviously clicked in his mind. "You mean to sayâ€|"

"Yes, Henun. I speak of myself as the murderer and the Field Master was Yuteri 'Wamotee."

"Wha-why?" Sani asked, looking very shocked at hearing Zeno really did go as far as the kill another Sangheili before.

"I wonder that myself," Joran said, glaring at Zeno. "Why are you even in your post? You should be dead for your crime."

"Easy, I was pardoned by the Arbiter himself," Zeno explained. "As for why: I killed him to protect the lives of my fellow Sangheili and to avenge the lives of one's already lost."

"I do notâ€|," Joran started to say, but Zeno held up a hand to silence him.

"Yuteri was a murderer himself," Zeno continued. "He killed Sangheili that did not fit his view of perfection. Semos, genetic defects, even minor war injuries were enough to put someone in his crosshairs. He had the highest squad mortality rate in the fleet and no one bothered to check as to why, besides me."

"But what drove you to check?" Henun asked.

"Because he attempted to kill me as well, for I was in his unit initially after joining the military."

"Yuteriâ€|he was the one that left you behind on the planetâ€|," Sani said, remembering the story Zeno told him.

"Correct, Sani."

The table was silent for a few moments before Joran spoke again. "I do not see how this applies to Sani," he said. "His crime is simply desertion, nothing that requires me to kill him."

"That whole scenario thing was simply to drive home how important it is to know the motive behind someone's actions," Zeno said. "Let us say you were in a bad relationship. A relationship you never wanted to be in. The other half of said relationship is controlling and abusive, whittling down your will and esteem with half-truths and threats to your life. Would you not want to get as far away from this person as possible? Even if it meant breaking a law?"

Joran looked uncomfortable and conflicted. "You speak of yourself againâ€|?"

"No, I speak of Sani."

9. Past Transgressions

****Authors Note:****_ Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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* * *

<p>Chapter 8: Past Transgressions

Sani shuddered as Zeno recounted his ordeal at Runi's hands, albeit indirectly. Memories started to wash up to the surface, causing him to close his eyes and lean against Zeno for comfort. He felt Zeno wrap his arm around him and rub his shoulder, helping to chase away the memories. Only after the memories have faded away did he open his eyes once more to see the reaction of the two _hashin._

Henun looked surprised, but sympathetic. Joran on the other handâ€|.

"I find this hard to believe," the elder _hashin_, sneered. "If this kid is so weak minded to allow such a thing to happen, why, by the gods, did he even join the military to begin with?"

"First off, Sani was forced into the military due to the Schism," Zeno replied, an edge to his voice. "If the Schism had never occurred, he would not have gotten into this situation. Do not judge him as 'weak minded' unless you have been in his situation yourself."

"You seem to forget what being a Sangheili is," Joran growled. "The fittest survive and thrive, while the weak purge themselves out of the gene pool."

Zeno's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Define whom would be considered the 'fittest', Joran," Zeno growled. "Define what is considered _weak_, for that matter." When Joran did not respond right away, he continued. "Were the Hilvum ancestors weak for being slaves, even though that is all they knew? Is Rtas weak for having been beaten and abused as a child to the point of developing a phobia of females? Am I weak for being rendered sterile from a treatment for an illness that would have killed me? Is Henun weak for losing his arm?"

"Iâ€|."

"Individual strength is often not enough for the challenges the gods put before us, Joran," Zeno pressed. "The Hilvum ancestors had the support of sympathizers from other keeps. Rtas had Anko, his sire, then later myself and his mate Ella. The Arbiter had Rtas, with the

addition of Vl'asuna Mura and probably other's I do not recall right now. Henun likely would not have adapted so well to the loss of his arm if I had not been there for him, if at all. Myself, I had a long string people that helped me become who I am today. Someone you see as weak has the potential to become one of the strongest if given the support and chances they need. It is my belief that those that try to stand on their own are among the weakest individuals out there."

By this point, Zeno was on his feet, leaning on the table with one hand while the other was pointing directly at Joran. A very intimidating sight. Joran seemed to agree as he was leaning back as far as he could without toppling over in his chair, his hands up in surrender. Seemingly satisfied he had made his point, Zeno sat back down again. "Now, shall we order our meal?" he said, his tone completely changing to a more cheerful one. "The waiter has been standing at the door for the last couple minutes, waiting."

"I do not think any of us have even looked at the menus yet," Sani pointed out.

"Hmm, good point." Zeno turned toward the waiter. "Give us a few moments, please." The man was all too eager to step away for a bit.

"I do not understand any of thisâ€¦," Joran muttered, looking at the menu.

"I can translate for you, if you want, Joran," Henun offered. "I learned quite a bit of the human tongue while in recon."

"Fine, whateverâ€¦."

"Speaking of which, you going to be alright with yours, Sani?" Zeno asked.

"I should be fine, Zeno. I think I understand enough to pass by," Sani replied.

"Alright, let me know if you need any help."

After a few moments the waiter returned and took their orders before quickly leaving again. The table was quiet for a few moments, filling the room with an uneasy silence. The silence was more unnerving to him than the argument that went on before, so Sani decided to break it. "Soâ€¦uhâ€¦what now?" he said softly. "What are we going to do about this bounty on my head?"

"You still deserted your post, kid," Joran replied, though his tone was somewhat guarded and with good reason, with the glare Zeno was giving him. "If I had been in your position, I would have just killed the bastard that hurt you."

"I admit the thought did come to mind," Sani said with a sigh. "But ultimately I could not, because I felt it would have been wrong of me to take the life of a man I had previously saved."

"I do not agree, but whateverâ€¦."

"What would it take to remove the bounty on his head?" Zeno asked.

"Well the obvious one is for him to turn himself in," Joran said.

"Not happening," Sani said quickly.

"Yeah, yeah I get that. Another is for the individual that put the bounty on you in the first place to remove it."

"Something Second Master Ruro is not likely to do," Zeno grumbled. "Unlessâ€¦".

"What are you thinking, Zeno?" Henun asked.

"Since Ruro is only in charge of the ship until Rtas returns to duty, can Rtas remove it?"

"If Rtas feels the bounty is unwarranted, yes," Joran replied. "But when is he going to return to duty?"

"I am not sure," Zeno admitted. "The amount of time he has been on leave already, it seems more like he is under semi-retirement."

"Which does not help at all," Henun said. "And Joran and I cannot simply drop the job, as that would leave the job open to other _hashin_."

"Yeah, _hashin_ that are likely a lot bigger assholes than me," Joran muttered.

Zeno was silent for a couple of moments. "What if, Sani was transferred to here?"

"A transfer? How would that help?" Joran asked, looking confused.

"The reason for the bounty is because Sani deserted his post, correct?" A nod. "If Sani is transferred here, then he could no longer be considered a deserter as his post would now be here, rather than his old post."

"I do not know, Zeno," Henun said, shaking his head. "That is stretching the rules a bit, not to mention the problem that you would have to get authorization from the appropriate authorities, including Ruro. Plus the justification for the transfer in the first place."

"Rtas already admitted to me that he was considering having Sani transferred to get him away from Runi," Zeno pointed out. "Plus, if I am not mistaken, bounties are usually done 'under the table' so to speak. As in, the one putting the bounty on someone does not want it to be public knowledge due to the shame."

"Generally, yes," Joran confirmed. "Most bounties could fall under that category, though it would depend upon the circumstances around it."

"I slipped out during the night cycle, just before the ship was to leave the supply station," Sani explained. "Ruro was active at the

time: I remember hearing his voice as I made my escape."

"Oooh, Ruro _would_ consider that embarrassing," Zeno said, licking a mandible. "And Rtas told me I was the first to inform him of Sani's disappearance."

"Which means Ruro does not want to admit openly that Sani slipped out from right under his nose," Henun said, scratching a mandible. "Getting him to agree with transferring Sani will be the hard part though."

Zeno had a smirk on his face. "I think I know how. It would put my experience dealing with politicians to good use."

"You are going to trick himâ€|."

"Bastard like him deserves it. I will contact Rtas to get his support first though, to cover my rear."

"Good idea. I am certain Rtas would want to know about this development anyway."

"Indeed."

The plan seemed sound to Sani, though he had little knowledge or experience in politics or logistics. Regardless, he was grateful Zeno was able to get the two _hashin_ to basically agree to not take him in. "What will you two do now?" Sani asked. "Since this job is pretty much bust for youâ€|."

"Well, until Zeno pulls his stunt, we cannot risk dropping the job," Henun said. "That would likely cause unneeded complications should other _hashin_ show up to collect."

"Thus you will have to stick around for a few days at least," Zeno said. "Plenty of time to go looking at art museums, eh Henun? I can give you list of places to go: I hear Florence, Italy has some lovely artwork."

Henun's eyes lit up, while Joran's expression was one of horror. "Dear gods no!" Joran said. "I will _not_ be dragged through rooms full of nothing but weird pictures and statues!"

"That is OK, Joran. You can stay in the hotel room bored out of your skull," Henun said mischievously.

"Now I am trying to decide on which is the lesser of two evilsâ€|."

Sani joined in the chuckling at that remark, grateful the tension was completely gone now.

* * *

><p>Their meal came a few moments later and the party ate in silence. The food was good, so Zeno definitely wanted to come back here another time: hopefully without the sudden company of additional guests. He wasn't sure why, but he preferred to be with Sani alone. Was it that he enjoyed his company? Or something else? It was yet another thing he had to figure out.<p>

After the meal was done, the two parties went their separate ways. Zeno and Sani went straight back home, neither wanting to deal with any more drama after today. It was time to wash up and relax for a bit before going to bed. At least that was what Zeno was hoping for. When he stepped out of the shower he was shocked to see Henun setting on the edge of his bed.

"Henun!" Zeno said, subconsciously making sure his towel was wrapped right. "What are youâ€|how did youâ€|?"

The other male turned toward him, a slight smile on his face. "First, Sani let me in," he said. "Second, I was recon like you: finding out where you lived was easy."

"Why then?"

Henun's usually smiling face turned serious and Zeno got a bad feeling he knew what this was about. "I wanted to take the opportunity to talk to you in private."

"Aboutâ€|?"

"Us."

Zeno felt his throat tighten. The guilt of what he did that day coming back in full force. However, he knew there would be no running away from it this time. He had to face it. "Alright," Zeno said softly, hanging his head. "Let me get dressed, first. Met me on the balcony."

Henun nodded and left his room, allowing him the chance to make himself decent. When he stepped out he noticed Sani giving him a look of concern. "Is something wrong, Zeno?" he asked.

"No, Sani, justâ€|," Zeno sighed, not too sure what to say to him. "I have some personal things I need to straighten out."

"I seeâ€|," Sani replied, looking like he understood. "Iâ€|umâ€|good luck?"

Zeno couldn't help but chuckle and he patted Sani on the shoulder. "Thanks, I will probably need it."

He stepped out on the balcony, where Henun was waiting. Henun didn't turn toward him when he joined him at the railing, just continued to stare out down unto the planet below. A moment of silence went between them before he finally spoke. "A beautiful planet," Henun said softly. "Not like Sanghelios, but beautiful in its own way. I can see why you wanted to stay here."

"Indeed," Zeno agreed.

"And yet it is just a convenient excuse, was it not?"

"What do youâ€|"

"Do not play ignorance with me, Zeno," Henun said harshly. "I looked at your file: you came here to try to escape the ghosts of your past."

Zeno said nothing. What could he say? It was the truth. Another moment of silence passed before Henun spoke again. "Those black marks on your body. A memorial to Miko?"

"Aye."

"Did it help?"

"â€|not reallyâ€|"

"You never did open up to me about your grief for his loss."

"I know."

"Why not?"

"Iâ€|do not know."

Henun sighed once more. "Do you know, Zeno, how much you hurt me when you ran out that day?" he asked softly.

This time Zeno turned his head away, the guilt heavy in his hearts. "Yes," he replied. "I regret what I did."

"And yet you did not even so much as call to apologize."

"I know I should have, but I never could bring myself to do so."

Zeno felt Henun's hand gently grab his head and turn it toward him once more. "Why?" Henun asked.

"Iâ€|," Zeno tried to turn his head away again, but Henun's grip was firm. "I was not readyâ€|I wasâ€|afraidâ€|."

"Afraid?" Henun looked confused. "Of what?"

"That I would be betraying Miko if I did anything with you."

Henun's hand finally left his face, Henun himself looked mildly disgusted. "The only way you could betray him, Zeno, is if you had taken an oath to remain single for the rest of your life. Did you make such an oath?"

"Noâ€|He just told me to live."

"Then I see no reason why you cannot take another lover, Zeno."

"I am not ready!"

"It has been four years, Zeno: most people would have moved on by now."

"I am not _most_ people."

"That is trueâ€|," Henun sighed. "Though it seems you do not even know yourself, Zeno."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sani. I have noticed how you act around him. You are fond of him, are you not?"

The question came as a bit of a shock to him. "I think you are reading too much into my actions, Henun. Sani is someone that needs help, help most of our people would not give him."

"And yet, you have him staying here in your own quarters, rather than set him up with his own place?"

"A precautionary measure to keep other Sangheili residents from harassing him."

"Which is no longer needed, considering said Sangheili would know he is under your protection by now. Still, he remains as a roommate, literally, considering your bedroom has _two_ beds."

"Unmarried Hilvums sleep in communal beds, Henun. I simply made an arrangement to accommodate that within my comfort zone. It has nothing to do with perceived intimacy between us."

"The body language between you two says otherwise."

"Again, you are reading too much into my actions. Just what are you getting at with this third degree treatment, Henun?"

Henun sighed and looked away for a moment before placing his hand on Zeno's shoulder. "It is obvious you have not woken up to the possibility yet, Zeno, likely due to demons of your past blocking it from your mind. I ask these things, because I want to be sure you are alright. And for my own closure. Before I drop this subject though, I have one question I need to ask you."

"What is that, Henun?"

"Do you feel anything for me, Zeno? Back then or now?"

Zeno's breath hitched in his throat briefly as he closed his eyes and thought over his answer carefully. "Back then I do not know what I was feeling, but now I feel only the bond of friendship toward you, Henun and the guilt for the pain I caused you."

There was a heavy sigh. "I figured as much." He heard Henun say as Zeno opened his eyes once more. "Though you should not be the one to bare all the guilt, Zeno: I am to blame as well."

"What?" Zeno blinked, confused. "No, Henun. I am."

"Please, Zeno. I was only thinking of myself that day. The thought that you were not ready to move on did not even cross my mind when I said what I did." This time it was Henun whom turned his head away. "I was desperate for a real relationship and I read too much into your acts of kindness toward me. I realized my selfishness, and my error, the moment you ran out my door, but it was too late to take back what I said, even though I meant it at the time."

"But love is not supposed to be a selfish emotion."

"It can be," Henun countered, turning back to face him. "If you try

to force it upon someone that does not love you back, which is what I attempted to do. I know now that any relationship beyond friendship between us was never meant to be, besidesâ€|my heart is for another nowâ€|."

Zeno was about to ask who, but then he remembered how Henun reacted when Zeno found out Joran was after Sani. "Joran?" Henun turned his head away slightly, a faint smile and a hint of a blush on his face. "Thought so. What do you see in him, Henun? He is kind of an assâ€|."

"Not sure, to be honest," Henun said softly, still blushing. "What I do know is that I liked the fact that he did not judge me based solely on lack of my arm, nor on my status as a painter then. Well, that I helped him take down a particularly strong Mark likely helped on the 'respect' department as well."

"So that is how you ended up working with himâ€|."

"I was not hired right then and there, but sometime later. Turned out while he was on that job, his previous partner got himself killed by crossing lines that should never be crossed."

"So he needed a new partnerâ€|and helping him with a previous job convinced him to try you out?"

"That and the fact that I mentioned I was formerly Special Operations Reconnaissance," Henun said with a smirk. That smirked faded, his expression turned to one of worry. "The problem though, is that I am not sure if he actually likes me the way I like him...He is a big womanizer, with no indication he leans my way."

"Appears to be as straight as they come, as the humans would say."

"Yeahâ€|."

"Seems you have had bad luck in this department so far."

Henun snorted. "Tell me about it. Still, a part of me feels he does like meâ€|."

"I have not been around him long enough, let alone got to know him to be able to help you determine for certain. If he does, however, it could be that he is confused and uncertain what to do, especially if he has only been attracted to females until now. Does he know you are sebo?"

"Not sure. I did tell him that you and I had a falling out, but that can be taken in different ways."

Zeno licked a mandible as he mulled over what to say next. "Do you know how he feels about semos or sebos?" Henun shook his head. "I would suggest finding out first, before admitting your feelings for him, Henun."

"Good idea. It would really be bad if Joran turned out to be a Juwi in that departmentâ€|."

"Indeed. If it turns out he does not mind people like us, then you

can explore further. Just do not try to do what you did to meâ€|."

"Do not worry, I learned my lesson last time." After a brief moment, Henun said. "Thank you, Zeno. This discussion helped ease a weight off my shoulders."

"Same here," Zeno admitted. "Good luck with Joran, Henun. I hope he is the one for you."

"Likewise with you and Sani."

"Henun, I told youâ€|."

Henun put a finger to his snout, silencing him. "Do not close yourself off to the possibility so quickly, Zeno," Henun said softly, concern in his eyes. "Otherwise, you will only hurt yourself, and likely Sani, in the process." Zeno said nothing when Henun removed his finger. "I hope I gave you something to think about, Zeno. I know I do."

As Henun turned and left the balcony, Zeno leaned on the railing and stared out into the blackness of space.

He did indeed have a lot to think aboutâ€|.

10. Friendly Advice

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><p>Chapter 9: Friendly Advice

Sani knew he shouldn't be listening in, but he could not help himself. Zeno had looked like he was in some kind of distress before going onto the balcony and Sani felt concerned. He knew it was none of his business, but he wanted to be sure Zeno was alright. Unfortunately, he had only caught snippets of the conversation due to the low tone both used, especially right now. He certainly did not want to make any judgments without knowing the full storyâ€|.

"It is impolite to listen in on a private conversation."

Sani yelped faintly as he jumped away from the source of the voice. It was Henun. He didn't look angry, though he did have his remaining hand on one hip as he gave him a scolding look. "Sorryâ€|Iâ€|umâ€|," Sani started to say, trying to think of some excuse.

"It is alright," Henun said, waving his hand dismissively. "You were worried about Zeno, I take it?"

Sani blushed faintly as he nodded. "Heâ€|he has done so much for me, Iâ€|." The rest of his words died as he just blushed even more.

"I see. You have grown fond of him." If he could blush any harder he would be the same skin tone as Zeno. "Come, I would like to speak to you privately."

"A-about?"

"Zeno, of course."

Henun went into the kitchen and Sani followed him with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. The older male gestured to the kitchen table and they both sat down, across from each other. "Now, how has Zeno been treating you?" Henun asked.

The question was a bit puzzling to him: wasn't it obvious? "He treats me with kindness and understanding," Sani replied. "He seems willing to risk his life and career for me, though a part of me still wonders why he should bother. I owe him so much, yet I do not know how to repay him—he seems to have everything he wants."

"Not everything," Henun said softly. "I know a part of him, deep down, longs to be in the arms of someone he loves. But he has closed that part of himself, at least consciously. Why, I do not know for sure. Could be fear of losing that person like he did Miko. Or even guilt over what happened between us, maybe guilt over not being able to save Miko. Perhaps even a bit of that damn Sangheili pride our species seems to be cursed with."

"Zeno does not seem to be the type to let pride consume him."

"Perhaps not in the way we usually see it."

"What do you mean?"

Henun shook his head, likely uncertain himself. "Regardless, I think you can help him. Tell me, has he grieved at all to your knowledge?"

"Yes. Not that long ago, in fact," Sani said. "I helped him break down the wall that was keeping back his tears. He wept for a very long time."

"So you managed to do what I could not."

"You mean?"

"Yes, I tried to help him once. Though I went about it the wrong way, let my emotions take control and hurt us both. We have reconciled that now." He paused a moment before saying. "Listen, I think you two are meant for each other."

The statement was sudden, making Sani lean back in his chair a bit. "Huh?"

Henun chuckled good naturedly. "Nothing happens without reason, Sani. A point Zeno alluded to himself during dinner. I believe you two were meant to meet each other and stay together. You already have the affection for him, but Zeno still has demons to defeat before he realizes he feels the same for you."

Sani felt himself blushing again. "Y-you really thing he likes me like that"

"Most Sangheili would not have gone as far as he has to help you," Henun pointed out. "Even Rtas has not. Granted, Zeno does have a slight reputation for being a rebel to begin with, but I do not think that negates what he feels toward you. Just do not tell him I told you all this, Sani, else he will accuse me of putting ideas in your head."

"I will not, you have my word," Sani said, giggling faintly.

"Good, I best be going. Joran is likely going stir crazy at the inn right now."

As Henun rose and started to leave, Sani felt a burning question pop up in his mind. "Henun," he said, standing up himself.

"Yes?" Henun paused and looked back at him.

"D-do you still love him?"

"Zeno?"

"Ayeâ€¦|."

Henun turned his head away briefly before turning it back toward him, a sad smile on his face. "I would be lying if I said a small part of me did not yearn for him still." He sighed and then added. "But do not concern yourself with my feelings: I have accepted that he and I will never be."

"I understand."

"Oh, would you kindly tell Zeno to inform us when he pulls his stunt on Ruro please? Especially if he succeeds."

"I will, _supmus me'yu_, Henun."

Henun's eyes widened slightly at that. "Ah, you are of the old beliefs, before the Covenant came into being."

"My keep always have had those beliefs, we are just not very open about it."

"A good thing," Henun said. "Just be careful who you say that too: the Covenant religion may have been proven false, but some still cling to it."

Sani nodded. "A lesson all those that leave the keep for the military are given. Do not worry, I will be careful."

After Henun left the residence, Sani went to the balcony. Zeno was still there, staring out into space, looking deep in thought. Since he could not make out most of the conversation, he had little idea what it was those two had discussed to cause Zeno to look so distant. Zeno did mention before it was personal issues and Henun told him that Zeno had demons he needed to defeat, but nothing specific. Sani did know about Miko at least, so maybe it was related to him again?

Henun did suggest that Zeno could still be feeling guilt over it. Sani shook his head: it wasn't his business unless Zeno wanted to confide him in about it. Still, he couldn't help but feel worried.

"Zeno?" he called out softly.

"Hmm?" Zeno did not look at him, still looking lost in his thoughts.

"Are you alright?"

This time Zeno did look at him, his expression one of sorrow and confusion. "I will be," he replied. "Just have a lot to think about."

"Such as?"

"Personal things," Zeno said with a sigh. "Rather not say until I sort them out." Sani nodded, figuring as much. "Did Henun?"

"He has left, yes," Sani confirmed. "He asked me to tell you to contact him when you pull your stunt on Ruro, particularly if you succeed."

Zeno chuckled mildly. "I intend to, no worries. May be a few days before I can attempt it, though. Need to coordinate with Rtas and such first."

Sani nodded once more and then he hugged him. "Thank you, for doing all this for me," he said softly. _Oh!_ he thought as he realized this was the first time he hugged him when he didn't have a shirt on. _He feels so warm!_ And soft, especially his belly. Purring softly, he couldn't help but explore a bit.

* * *

><p>Zeno gasped faintly when Sani embraced him, taken by surprise at the gesture. His lack of shirt meant he could feel the softness of Sani's hands and the warm tickle of his breath on his back. It was awakening old feelings, feelings he thought were long buried. Had Henun been right about his observations? What of Sani's feelings? The way he was lingering in this embrace, his purring.

Fear started to creep into his mind. Fear he wasn't ready to face yet. He had to stop this.

"Sa-Sani?" he said, unable to stop the tremor in his voice.

"Oh!" he heard Sani say, sounding surprised and embarrassed as he let go of him immediately. Zeno felt the pain of loss when he did so, but he ignored it. "I..I am sorry."

"It is OK," Zeno said, turning to face him. "We should probably head to bed now: it has been a long day."

"Aye," Sani said. "Mind if I?"

"Sleep in my room?" Zeno finished for him. "You know you do not need to ask."

"I know, but I feel better about it if I ask first."

Zeno chuckled as he patted his back. "Well, I cannot claim no one taught you good manners."

Sani smiled, a sweet, innocent looking smile that made him smile himself. Zeno wondered how often Sani got to smile like that during his time in the military: likely not often, if at all. Regardless, this smile made him want to stroke his face, but Zeno resisted the urge.

As they returned to the living room, the sound of the door buzzer broke the silence.

"I wonder who that could be," Sani muttered, looking at the door warily, his smile gone.

"If I had to guess, Henun. He probably forgot about something," Zeno said as he approached the door. "Head on to bed, Sani. I will take care of this."

"Alright," Sani said as he turned and headed for the bedroom.

Zeno waited until he heard the bedroom door close before answering the front door. To his surprise, it wasn't Henun at the door, but his partner, Joran. The scarred Sangheili looked up at him, his eyes widening briefly in mild surprise: Zeno assumed the surprise was due to his tattoo.

"Yes?" Zeno queried when Joran didn't speak immediately. "Can I help you?"

It took Joran a moment longer before he responded, the expression on his face one of uncertainty. "I know Henun came here to see you," he said, sounding silently nervous. "Is he still here?"

"He left a few minutes ago," Zeno said folding his arms. "So you just missed him. Why? Getting worried about him?"

Zeno smirked when the purple taint of a blush rose to Joran's cheeks: so the man did have some feelings for Henun. "He told me a bit of what happened between you two before," Joran admitted, looking away. "Iâ€¦"

"Wanted to know if things got worked out?" Zeno finished for him. When Joran nodded, he said. "No need to worry. Past issues between us has been resolved and we are just friends. I am certain Henun would have told you this himself, if you had been patient enough to wait for his return."

"I only had him for a business partner for a month and I did not want to risk losing him so soon," Joran said stiffly. "Hashin partners are incredibly hard to find and I was lucky to find him when I did."

"No need to get all defensive," Zeno said teasingly.

"Whateverâ€¦I will take my leave now."

"One moment more of your time if you please," Zeno said curtly. "There are a couple of things I would like to discuss with you first."

"What more could you possibly want to talk to me about," Joran said, his tone one of annoyance.

"First off, has Henun had any episodes since he joined you?"

"Episodes?" Joran raised an eye ridge. "What do you mean?"

"I take it he has not then, but I fear it is only a matter of time," Zeno said with a sigh. "Obviously you know about his arm and I appreciate you not shunning him for it as others have done. However, he can be rather sensitive about it at times. If he attempts something that is difficult to do without two hands he can go into fits, or worse, a deep state of depression. You will need to be supportive and understanding when this happens. Do not blow him off, otherwise it may drive him to do something stupid."

Joran looked surprised, even concerned. "He has before?"

"Yes, while I was with him. Some episodes took days to pass"

"I see is that all?"

"No, one more thing, a friendly warning." Zeno leaned forward until his head was level with Joran's, a look on his face that may cause even a Brute to back off. "If I hear at any time that you hurt him in some way, I will hunt you down and rip your face off. Got it?"

Joran visibly gulped as he nodded.

"Good boy," Zeno mockingly patted Joran on the head before standing up straight again. "Now best return to your room: I am certain Henun is wondering where you ran off too."

"Ri-ri-right um tha-thank you for your time Ambassador."

Joran said as he backed away a couple of paces before turning and walking quickly away.

"Good night Joran!" Zeno called out to him before closing the door. He chuckled to himself as he turned from the door and headed for his bedroom. _I feel like I am playing cupid,_ he thought to himself. _Still, it would be good for Henun to settle down with someone, even if it is a stubborn ass like Joran._

Speaking of relationships, Zeno saw that Sani was already asleep. _How does he do that?_ Zeno wondered. Sani looked so cute, so innocent, as he slept: one wouldn't think he had been through the pain he had. Zeno caught himself staring and focused himself to look away and start preparing for bed himself.

What am I to do? He thought. _If what Henun said is true then..._ No, he had to nip it in the bud before it got any further. Zeno felt he wasn't ready for another relationship, plus Sani would be better off with someone closer to his own rank. He'd use age as well, but that wasn't applicable here: Sani was not that much younger than he was.

_But how? _Zeno thought as he climbed into bed. It was another problem he needed to figure out. In the meantime, Zeno decided he should try to minimize any affectionate gestures, to help weaken the bond that was forming between him.

As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered why his hearts seemed to ache a bit.

* * *

><p>He was beyond frustrated now. Every weight he had tried was either too light, or too big to fit on the pad. On top of that, weights that looked like they were heavy, yet small enough on the base to fit on the pad, felt like they were hollow and thus too light to trigger the pad. Plus the shape of the weights themselves made it impossible to put more than one on the pad.

If none of the weights work, then how the hell am I suppose to trigger the pad? He thought with a growl, then his eyes widened when a thought hit him. Unlessâ€¦, walking over to the pad, he raised his foot then stepped upon the pad. It sank deeper into the floor with a click, the panel snapping open with a click of its own, revealing the key within.

He laughed at how foolish he was: the weights were a distraction, a false lead. He had only needed the weight of his own body to get the key. With the key now in hand, he went to the door and opened the padlock, then the door itself.

Only to be greeted by yet another room.

This one was smaller than the others and devoid of any kind of 'furniture' beyond the standard torches and of course the door leading out. The door itself was different, looking like a simple barred door like one would see in some jails. This time though, the door was being physically guarded by a dark figure in black and purple armor, whom was wielding a rather dangerous looking sword.

Looks like I may be fighting my way out of this one, he thought. The problem though, was that he was unarmed and there was nothing in this room to use as a weapon, besides the torches. Maybe the polite approach may work.

"_Excuse me," he said, walking up to the figure. "I would like to get through."_

"_Only the privileged may pass," the figure snarled. "Get lost."_

"_Privileged?" he echoed, feeling insulted. "Do you not know who I am?"_

"_You are nothing."_

"_Who are you to judge my worth? Stand aside!"_

_The figured suddenly moved, but not in the way he was wanting. Before he could react, he was backhanded in the chest by the figure,

sending him crashing to the floor a few feet back. Winded, it took him a moment to catch his breath. "Only the privileged may pass," the figure repeated._

"_We will see about that," he hissed, getting to his feet_. _Another sound, a whimper, distracted him a moment. Turning around, he saw there was another individual in the room with him: a small boy. The child was sitting in one of the far corners, whimpering, trying to make himself as small as he could. He noticed that the child kept looking at the other figure fearfully and the other figure was glaring back. No way would he be able to help me here, he thought with a frown, turning his attention back to the asshole in front of him. "I was being polite before, now I am going to beat your ass!"_

As he charged, the armored figure brought his sword out to bear. He was able to duck the first swing, but the figure reversed his swing far quicker than what should have been possible. Before he could react, he was on the floor, one leg lopped off and the other deeply cut. As he lay there bleeding to death, the armored figure inexplicably turned its attention from him and charged the boy.

"_No!" he cried, but was helpless to stop him as the figure cut the boy in two, the child's death scream echoing in his ears. "Whyâ€|," he said weakly as the murderous figure walked casually back to him. "He was no threat to youâ€|."_

"_He was not worthy," the figure said coldly, raising his word for the killing blow. "And neither are you."_

The sword was then thrust toward his headâ€|.

* * *

><p>Zeno awoke with a gasp. Reflexively, he felt his head and neck, along with his legs, and found that they were still intact. These dreams are getting worseâ€|, he thought with a moan, rubbing his head. Checking the time, he saw it was only a couple of hours before he would have gotten up anyway. _May as well stay up,_ he thought as he pulled himself out of bed.

He reached for the light, only to remember at the last moment that Sani was sleeping in the same room. Not wanting to disturb him, Zeno left the light off and fished for his robe. By the time he slipped it on, his eyes had adjusted enough to where he could see without tripping over things. Still, he turned the lights on low in the living room.

"Gah!" He jumped with a start when he saw his black and purple SpecOps armor, which was placed on a Sangheili sized mannequin: he had mistaken it for the figure he saw in his dream at first. Zeno stared at it, not sure if the resemblance was related to the dream or if it was just a coincidence.

He prayed it was the latterâ€|

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><p>Chapter 10: Mistake

Zeno spent the majority of the morning contacting the appropriate human officials to inform them of his plan and to get their approval. Most sounded eager to stick it to someone like Ruro, while a couple were just shrugged their shoulders like it wasn't a big deal. Zeno found himself not terribly bothered if they cared or not, just so long as they approved of the transfer on their end. Now it was a matter of getting the needed paperwork started and to do that, he needed to contact Rtas, as Zeno did not have the authority to start the process himself.

Thankfully, it was daytime when Zeno put in his call to Sanghelios and Rtas was home. After explaining the situation, Rtas was understandably peeved about Ruro's actions. It turned out that Rtas did a bit of checking and it was discovered that the Second Master did not even bother informing their military leadership of Sani's desertion. The theory that Ruro wanted to resolve this without any of his superiors find out was proving to be correct, which in turn would make this plan more likely to work. The only snag was keeping the Second Master from actually reading the documents before signing them. Zeno hoped he would be able to 'convince' the Second Master that reading the material would not be needed.

Either way, it would be a few days for Rtas to finish things on his end, so Zeno had no choice but to wait. A wait that proved to be a bit testing, due to Sani wanting to be close a lot more all of a sudden, which made his decision to cut back on the affection with him that much harder. At first, Zeno assumed this desire to be close to him was out of nervousness of the upcoming event, but as time went on, Zeno realized Sani's actions were more out of genuine affection for him. It was proving to be a big problem, one that Zeno was not sure how to solve without breaking the man's heart. He did not want to have a repeat of what he did to Henun.

One day after his ambassador duties were done, instead of heading home immediately he stopped by the observation deck to try to figure out a solution. A part of him wanted to just let things go as they may, to see what happens. Another part of him though knew exactly what would happen, however, and the risk to Sani's life would increase and Zeno knew he would not always be able to protect him. No, he knew it would be best for both of them if the relationship never got off the ground, but how to break it to Sani?

"I was wondering why there was a black haze in here," a familiar voice said. Zeno turned to see his friend Luke approaching him. "What has got you thinking so hard?"

"Trying to figure out how to prevent a relationship from going any further," Zeno said quietly.

"Oh? Know a couple of a folks that you feel are not a good match? Didn't know you were the matchmaking type. Who are they?"

"You are looking at oneâ€|and the otherâ€|I know you heard about the stowaway over a week agoâ€|."

"Ah yes, the Sangheili you took under your arm personally. Sani, his name is, isn't it?"

"Aye."

"So what makes you two so incompatible?"

"It is not so much that we are _incompatible_, but that it would be better off if we did not get intimate."

"Why not? It's the stigma of the semo thing isn't it?"

"No, I am past caring what other Sangheili think about my sexual orientation. Though I do suspect the High Council is just looking for an excuse to be rid of me: getting into a relationship with another male is just asking them to use that against me."

"I have heard rumblings of discontent about you from that areaâ€|," Luke admitted. "But there is more to this isn't there?"

Zeno sighed heavily. "I could not save Mikoâ€|and he had more combat experience then I did at the time. I know I cannot protect Sani from everythingâ€|."

"Zeno, of _course_ you cannot protect him from everything: that is being unrealistic. It is a risk everyone who falls in love takes. As you obviously already know, the ones you love will not be with you forever, but the time you had with them is what makes that love worth it. Besides, so long as you are here, as the Ambassador of Sanghelios, you will have folks like me watching your back, and Sani's, should you opt to allow it to happen."

"So you think I should just let things run their courseâ€|."

"I'll be honest with you, Zeno: I may not see you as often as I used to, but ever since Sani arrived on the Cairo I've never seen you happier. I may not know much about your past, but I do know that if anyone deserves a chance at being happy, it is you."

"But at what cost?"

"Isn't love worth any cost?"

Zeno found himself honestly unable to answer that.

* * *

><p>Couple of days later

Sani was a nervous bundle of energy: that morning, Sesai informed them that the documentation required for the transfer had been completed on Rtas end. He worried about whether or not Ruro would figure out the trick before things were finished and about Zeno, whom had been rather distant lately. At first Sani assumed it was just due

to the upcoming conversation with Second Master Ruro, but he couldn't be thinking about that every free moment could he? He remembered what Henun said, that Zeno had demons to defeat: could that be it?

Maybe once I am truly free, I can see about helping him with these 'demons', he thought.

"Sani, it is time." He heard Zeno call to him from the living room.

"Alright," he called back before stepping out. Not surprisingly, Zeno was in his full ambassador armor get up. He caught a strange look on Zeno's face when he looked at him: it looked like a mix of longing andâ€|regret? Sani didn't have the chance to inquire about it though, as Zeno was already walking out the front door, forcing Sani to job to catch up to him.

"Where are we going? Your office?" he asked.

"Main security office," Zeno replied simply.

"Oh," Sani figured it out quickly. "To help make this look legitimate, right?" Zeno only nodded in confirmation. This was definitely not like him. "Zeno, is something wrong?"

"No."

"Are you sure? You are usually not like thisâ€|."

"Sani, please, this is not the time."

Sani sighed, taking the hint. Yes, something was definitely bothering him and this time he was unwilling to talk about it. _Perhaps he just wants to keep his focus on the task at hand,_ he thought. _Yes, that has to be it._

He hoped that was it.

They arrived at the security station a few minutes later. To both their surprise, Joran and Henun where there. "What are you two doing here?" Zeno asked.

"I want to see the look on that bastards face when this is over," Henun said with a smile.

"And I must admit I am curious as well," Joran muttered.

"This will not be a problem will it?"

"Should not be, so long as you stay out of line of sight," Zeno said. Sani watched as Zeno walked over to a security official and whispered something to him. The man nodded and approached him.

"May I see your hands please?" the officer said.

Sani, a little confused, held them out, only to be shocked when the man put a pair of cuffs on him. "Wha-wha-whaâ€|," he stammered, his eyes wide and shock and confusing running through his head. Looking around, he saw the two hashin looked equally confused, though after a moment Henun seemed to understand and whispered something to Joran,

whom nodded. "What is going on?" Sani demanded.

"Quiet," Zeno said, his tone firm. "I have a call to make."

He was led into another room, tears tickling his eyes. What was going on? Is he really going to turn him over to Ruro despite his promise? Has he been wrong about Zeno all along? _No, this has to be a ruse to help trick the Second Master!_ he told himself. _By the spirits, please let that be so!_

Sani listened as Zeno gave Sesai the appropriate call information. As they waited to see if there would be a response, Sani looked at Zeno. However, the ambassador did not even look at him, his attention completely focused on the holo projector in front of him. After a moment, the communication's officer that was on duty answered, to whom Zeno gave his identity and requested to speak to Ruro. A moment more, Second Master Ruro himself appeared.

Ambassador Zeno, to what do I owe annoyance of this call?- the visage of the second master said.

"Now, now, Second Master," Zeno chided. "Is that anyway to address an important government official?"

The second master snorted. _"The High Council could have done much better than to give the likes of you the position of ambassador. I pray there is some official reason you are bothering me?-_

"As a matter of fact, yes. I have someone I believe belongs to you." Sani felt Zeno grab his arm and pulled him into range of the transmitter. "He was found stowing away onboard one of the cargo ships."

The Second Master visibly scowled. _"Ah, so that is where that little coward ran to. I have big plans for him when I get my claws on his hide.- _ Sani could not help but gulp and try to shrink away a bit, but Zeno held him firm. _"Are you able to send him my way, or will I be forced to wait until my ship arrives there in over three months time?-_

"I can make the needed arrangements after the required documentation I am having the station AI send you at this moment is signed and returned."

Documentation?- Ruro raised an eye ridge. _"Why do I need to fill out paperwork for a troop that is assigned to my ship?-_

"The humans love their paperwork, Second Master. They like to keep track of every transaction, especially when it comes to the transfer of important assets. Helps to pinpoint accountability should something go wrong."

Humph, I suppose that makes some sense. Waitâ€|if this is supposed to be from the humans, why do these forms look just like ourâ€|. -

"The station AI, Sesai is very considerate, Second Master," Zeno said quickly. "She coverts the forms into our official documentation and back again for ease of reading for both parties."

_Humans and their damn AIâ€|. _Ruro grumbled as his holographic form started typing on an unseen console.

As he watched, Sani saw the slightest of smirks on Zeno's face. Relief immediately rushed through him: this was all part of the ruse. He then reminded himself that he was supposed to look depressed and frightened and did his best to fake it from that point on.

There, it is done. When will I have him?-

"Sesai, when the documents have been returned, you know what to do."

"Affirmative, Ambassador." Sesai's voice responded.

"There are a couple more folks this documentation has to go through before I can begin to work on that," Zeno said, returning his attention to Ruro. "If you can wait a few moments, I will send you a copy of the finished paperwork."

Why bother keeping me on for that?- Ruro asked.

"I like making sure such things arrived at their proper destination," Zeno said simply.

Humph, whatever.-

"Ah yes, there is one more thing I wanted to talk to you about while we wait."

Ruro was looking increasingly annoyed. _And that is?-_

"Since it is no longer needed, you may as well take that bounty of the kid's head."

_How did youâ€|. _-

"A pair of _hashin_ arrived shortly after Sani was apprehended. Seeing he is already in custody, they cannot claim the bounty. It would be a shame to have more of them show up looking for someone they can no longer claim when there are more dangerous Marks to see to."

An astute point.- Sani watched as Ruro did more work on a console. _â€"There, I have requested the bounty be removed.-_

"And what luck, document has finished making its rounds. Sesai if you would please, send him a copy."

"Of course, Ambassador."

"Please let me know when you receive it, Second Master."

Ruro simply grunted in response, looking too eager to finally end this conversation. After a moment, he nodded in confirmation. It was that point, Zeno developed a wide grin on his face. "Thank you, Second Master. Sani will be much happier here." He then looked at the officer whom had been patiently waiting this whole time. "Officer?"

What?- Ruro looked on confused as the officer walked over and took the cuffs off. _"What are you doing! Why are you"-_ Everyone watched Ruro apparently started reading the documentation he just signed fully. His face went from confusion to shock and from shock to anger over the course of a couple of minutes. _"You"you LIED to me!-_

"Actually I did not," Zeno said smugly. "If you recall our conversation, I never actually said where Sani was being transferred to. If your memory is not what it is used to be, I can have Sesai send you the audio records. Besides, should not any individual that is in a position of power take care to read everything before he signs it?"

-You had no authorization to do this!-_ Ruro snarled. _"Just wait until I inform you commander"the High Council!-_

"Oh now you see, here is where it gets a bit sticky"for you."

What are you talking about?-

"First off, I authorized this through Shipmaster Rtas, whom is also your superior, whom you did not inform about Sani's disappearance, let alone his superior or anyone else above you. You chose to go over their heads and hired hashin on your own: have you forgotten our own procedures for such things, Ruro? Therefore, as far as they are concerned, Sani never left the Shadow of Intent under the circumstances he did."

Ruro looked a bit disturbed, but quickly regained his composure. _"And just how will you explain his sudden appearance over there when this ship is three months away?-_

"One, Rtas has been wanting to transfer him somewhere for some time, so he had some paperwork already started. Two, if you would notice, the transfer date is set to 'immediate'. I feel both of those should answer your question."

Ruro just stood there for a few long moments, glaring daggers at Zeno. _"You will pay for this, ambassador, I promise you.-_ The connection then cut off abruptly.

"Threatening me now? Boy is he working on his rap sheet," Zeno snickered.

"The look on his face was priceless," Henun said. "I had to fight to keep from laughing. Joran cracked a smile too."

"I did not", the elder hashin muttered.

"Yes you did, do not lie."

"Alright"just a little".

"You had me worried for a while there, Zeno," Sani said. "Especially when those cuffs were put on me".

"Sorry about that. I hope you understood why I did that," Zeno said, slightly sheepishly.

"I did, after a while. What now though? Surely Ruro will protest this with the Council and the _Shadow of Intent_ is still going to be here in three months time: Ruro will no doubt try to get me back himself then."

"By then, your training should be advanced to the point where you can fight him off if needed. Regardless, you are free."

Free. It was such a nice word, but Sani knew better to considering himself _free_ just yet. "I will not be truly free until I face Ruro," he pointed out. "And win against him."

"That time will come, faster than you think. In the mean time, you need to continue your training and figure out what you want to do now that you are _officially_ part of the crew here."

"I am sure we will figure out something." Sani then embraced him, though he wished Zeno wasn't wearing his armor. "Thank you, again, for everything."

It bothered him a bit when he noticed Zeno acted almost _repulsed_ by the embrace.

* * *

><p>Several days later.

Zeno was starting to get frustrated. Not only was the newest reoccurring nightmare getting worse, but Sani wasn't getting the hint that he needed to move on. Granted, he hadn't outright _told_ him to move out, as he didn't want to risk him taking it badly, but at the rate this was going.

Worse, Sani was trying to be more and more affectionate toward him and it was getting harder and harder to resist the feelings building up within. He was starting to wish Henun hadn't left the same day they got Ruro to sign the transfer paperwork. Then again, he already knew what Henun would say: to let the relationship happen. No matter how much he tried to rationalize that getting into a relationship was a bad idea, these feelings persisted and the longer Sani stayed, they got stronger. It was starting to make him very grumpy and he feared he may snap at Sani without meaning to.

Then, one day, things just fell apart completely.

Zeno was looking through a list of available rooms on the station, trying to figure out how to get Sani to leave without hurting him when Sani came into the room and nuzzled him. "Sani, please!" Zeno said abruptly, a bit harsher than he wanted.

Sani immediately jumped back, looking a bit surprised and hurt by the outburst. "What is wrong, Zeno?" he asked. "Ambassador duties frustrating you?"

"I am frustrated, but not about my job."

"What is bothering you then?"

Zeno sighed heavily, taking a moment to find, hopefully, the right

words. "Do you remember what I said when we first met? Specifically about where you would be staying?"

It took a moment for Sani to answer as he thought it over. "I remember you mentioning you did not have any VIPs coming over for a while to your knowledge and that I could stay for the time being."

"'For the time being'," Zeno echoed, empathizing the phrase. "I also mentioned you would be in my personal care until things are sorted out."

"What are you trying to say?" From the look on Sani's face, he knew exactly what he was saying. Zeno had a bad feeling Sani wasn't going to take this well at all, but knew he had to persist.

"Your record is clean now, there are no hashin after your head and Ruro no longer has any authority over you. Thus there is no need for you to continue staying here."

"But I want to stay here," Sani protested.

"You cannot."

"Why?"

Zeno rubbed the back of his neck, again trying to find the right words. "It is for your own goodâ€|."

"My own good?" There was an edge to Sani's voice now.

"Yes. You cannot remain dependent on me," Zeno said, saying the first thing that came to mind. "Now that things are sorted out, you no longer need my protection: you can start the new life you wanted. I can cover your rent until you become financially independentâ€|."

"But I want that life to be with you." Sani put his hand on his shoulder, his voice soft with a hint of sadness to it, his eyes showing a hint of tears

Zeno turned his head away as he closed his own eyes and brushed his hand off. "I am sorry, but I cannot allow thatâ€|."

"Why not?" There was that edge to Sani's voice again.

"Iâ€|I just can'tâ€|." There was a tense silence, Zeno afraid to look at Sani, but knew he should. When he did, he wished he hadn't: there was so much hurt in Sani's eyes. "Iâ€|I am sorryâ€|," he started to say. "But it really is for theâ€|_argh!_" Pain erupted on his face as Sani slapped him. When he refocused on him, he saw not just hurt, but anger in those yellow-green eyes.

"You selfish, insensitive, cold-hearted asshole!" Sani snapped at him before storming toward his room. "You want me to leave? Then I'll leave!" Zeno watched in numb, shocked silence as Sani gathered up his belongings, stuffed them into an empty trash bag and stomped toward the door, hot angry tears in his eyes. "Farewell, ambassador." Sani snarled as he opened the front door, and then slammed it shut behind him.

Zeno started at the door, tears starting to stream down his face as a pain greater than he had ever felt before erupted in his chest. He just learned the hard way, that death is not necessarily the most painful way to lose someone you love. Zeno knew now, not only that both Henun and Luke had been right, but that he just made a terrible, terrible mistakeâ€¦|.

* * *

><p>AN:** Those that want to bitchslap Zeno, the line starts here *points*

12. Fun with a Drunk

**Authors Note:** I am so sorry about updating late! It completely slipped my mind!

Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 11: Fun with a Drunk

He probably had been the earliest customer in this establishment for the last few days, but the bartender didn't care so long as he didn't cause trouble. The human probably appreciated that he usually ordered milkshakes or other non-alcoholic drinks as well, considering the problems he witnessed drunk humans getting into. He imagined a drunken Sangheili would be even worseâ€¦|.

Sani usually left before the usual 'crowd' arrived anyway, as he preferred the peace and quiet. He knew he could have just stayed in the small apartment he had now, but Sani knew he would just go stir crazy if he kept himself cooped up in there. Besides, he really should be looking for a job, like he promised the station quartermaster he would so he could start paying the rent, but his mind just hadn't been into it.

Zeno. That damn Zeno was on his mind almost constantly, while both awake and asleep, distracting him from doing what he needed to do and keeping him from forgetting him. He really did want to forget after the heartbreak that man had caused him, yet he found himself still longing for him. Not even his training at the dojo was helping. Yamasheto did inquire on where Zeno was, to which Sani just told him he was busy: he really didn't want to talk about Zeno to anyone. _How can I still want him after what he did?_ Sani asked himself, for what must have been the thousandth time.

That's why he kept coming here, to isolate himself yet have enough social activity going on around him to distract himself. To try to sort out his thoughts and hopefully shake Zeno from his mind.: A part of him wondered what Zeno was doing now. _Probably doing the same thing he did before I came along, _he thought. _Likely forgot about me already._

"Sani, I presume?" a human voice said, disturbing his train of thought.

Sani looked up to see a human in a dark uniform. He looked vaguely familiar: wasn't he one of the humans he saw Zeno speak to a couple of times? A friend of his maybe? "I am. Whatever it is you want, make it quick," Sani said bitterly. "I would rather be alone."

"I am Lieutenant Luke McGuire," the human said. "Of the Office of Navel Intelligence."

"A spook, in other words," Sani huffed. "What does someone like you want with a lowly minor like me?"

The human, Luke, slid into the seat across from him before speaking again. "There is a situation going on that I feel you may be our best bet at resolving."

"And what situation is that?"

"The Ambassador—he has—."

"I want nothing to do with that self-centered ass!" Sani snapped hotly as he stood up abruptly, hands on the table, the pain of the rejection still too fresh.

"Please hear me out," Luke pleaded, holding up his hands. "I know some of what happened between you two—and it pains me that he went against my advice. However this is not about your relationship with him, but his life."

That gave Sani pause. "You speak as if there is a threat to his life," he said as he sat back down again.

"One of my organization's jobs is to look out for potential threats to the lives of important, influential figures, the Ambassador being one of them. I am certain you are aware that Zeno is not very popular in certain circles."

"I have not seen any outward hostility toward him here," Sani admitted. "But I do know there is a bit of internal strife with our species that is only just starting to surface due to the Schism and the truth behind the Great Journey."

"Yes. There is some of your kind that doesn't like the alliance between our species. Hell, there are some humans, I am sad to say, that dislike it. But the threat to Zeno seems to come from many different sides."

Sani raised an eye-ridge. "How so?"

"Well on the human side, they want him gone because he is a Sangheili: old grudges sometimes will never go away. On your end, you got some factions that want him dead because he supports the alliance, others because they feel he is becoming too _human, _and yet others simply because he is a semo."

"Yes, I can imagine all those possibilities, but you have yet to inform me what this has to do with me."

Luke sighed and rubbed his head. "I know little of his personal life, especially his past, despite being good friends with him. You likely know more about his history than I do simply because you are a fellow Sangheili. I do know, however, what he is like when he gets depressed."

"I admit I have only seen him depressed once: he tried to isolate himself back then."

"That is not what he used to do," Luke said. "Before he became ambassador, he would go drinking. Granted, the alcoholic content in our drinks is nothing compared to yours, so Zeno told me anyway, but sometimes he managed to drink enough to get drunk. Once he got so plastered he went streakingâ€¦."

"Streaking?"

"Ahâ€¦running around the station completely nude."

"Oh!" Sani blushed faintly, not sure if he should be enjoying the mental image he just got or not. Hell, Zeno was on his mind enough as isâ€¦

"Most of the time though he would strip down to his undies and start singing and dancing seductively. It was rather disturbingâ€¦."

Again, rather interesting mental images sprang into his head. Sani had to actually shake his head to clear it of them. "I have not heard anything about him doing that nowâ€¦."

"Because right now he is past even that point," Luke said sadly. "Last I heard, he was just sitting there out in a hallway in a drunken stupor. He won't respond to anyone, not even me. Sesai has isolated the area he is and is keeping an eye on him, but it is only a matter of time before someone makes an attempt on his lifeâ€¦or he takes his ownâ€¦."

"Butâ€¦waitâ€¦what is he so depressed over? It cannot be Mikoâ€¦as he is over his death as far as I know." Sani's eyes went wide when it clicked. "Meâ€¦it is about meâ€¦?" Luke slowly nodded. "Butâ€¦why? He wanted me out of his lifeâ€¦."

"I believe, he only said he did, because he feared for your life."

"I do notâ€¦."

"A common tactic opposing factions, at least of the human variety, use on their enemies is to go after the ones they love, Sani," Luke explained. "Especially if the target is not easily taken down himself. While I have never told him of the plots against his life we uncovered and stopped, I know he is aware that there are those that want him gone. Though I told him you would be as protected as well as he is should you have remained, he obviously still felt you would be safer if you weren't together." Luke sighed once more before adding. "He obviously did not expect you to take it as hard as you did, nor do I think he realized how attached to you he was."

Sani was torn. One part of him wanted to help him, but another wanted to leave him to rot: he wasn't sure which side was stronger. As he thought it over though, Luke sitting there waiting patiently for an answer, he realized that to not help would be going against everything he had been taught. Did he not, along with his keep, give Runi a chance despite not knowing why he ran from his keep? Didn't Zeno give him a second chance when another Sangheili most likely would have just sent him back? Hadn't he wanted to return the kindness Zeno had shown him anyway?

After several, agonizing minutes, he sighed and said: "What do you need me to do?"

* * *

><p>A few minutes laterâ€|.

It was hard to miss the large lump laying off to one side of the hallway. Harder to not notice the stench: Zeno must not have bathed at all, let alone go to proper facilities to relieve himself, since Sani had left in his huff a week ago. His clothing was stained and just plain filthy and the ground around him was littered with various bottles. Sani could see why they opted to just close this area off: any Sangheili that saw him in this state would have just drawn more ire at him, perhaps even killed him on sight due to shame.

At first, Sani feared he was too late, as he did not move or otherwise react when he approached. After watching him for a moment though, he was relieved to see that Zeno was indeed alive when he noticed his chest rising and falling as he breathed. The question now was, was Zeno sleeping, or in alcoholic-induced state of unconsciousness? Only one way to find out.

"Zeno," Sani said, coming closer. "Zeno!" There was faint snort, but nothing more. With an exasperated sigh, Sani lifted a foot and pushed on his shoulder, hard, causing him to nearly flip over.

This time Zeno made an audible complaint, though it wasn't in a language he had ever heard before, if it was a proper language at all. He had a pretty good guess on what it meant though: leave me alone. Sani wasn't about to comply though.

"Getâ€|UP!" Sani growled, this time kicking him.

"Oof!" Zeno coughed a couple of times before blinking up at him, his eyes unfocused. "Miko? Amâ€|am I dead?"

"I am not Miko and you are not dead, you drunken fool," Sani sighed as he pulled on one arm. "Come on, get on your feet. You need to go home."

"Oh Mikoâ€|I fucked upâ€|fuckedupgoodâ€|," Zeno slurred as he slowly rose to his feet, rather unsteadily.

"Zeno, I am notâ€|." Sani sighed and shook his head, realizing it was pointless to try to correct him on his identity. Zeno's brain was obviously so addled that he couldn't see clearly: that Sani bore some resemblance to Miko did not help matters at all. Just focus on getting him home, he told himself.

"Iâ€¦|didn't knowâ€¦|didn't knowâ€¦| my own heartâ€¦|didn't know," Zeno continued babbling as Sani did his best to steady him. "Chased him awayâ€¦|made him hurtâ€¦|made me hurt. I'ma foolâ€¦|lost my chanceâ€¦|lost himâ€¦|lost him good. Give anythingâ€¦|to fix itâ€¦|to have him backâ€¦|Iâ€¦|I love himâ€¦|."

"Zenoâ€¦|." Sani felt bad that it had to come to this for Zeno to admit his true feelings. He would have preferred a way that was a lot lessâ€¦|heart-wrenching. "Everything will be fine."

"Noâ€¦|I told youâ€¦|told you, I fucked upâ€¦|I lost himâ€¦|I will likely never seeâ€¦|see him againâ€¦|."

"You do not know that. He may be closer than you think." He could help but chuckle a bit as he started helping Zeno walk. "Come on, let's get you home so you can sleep this off."

"Don't wanna sleepâ€¦|nightmares haunt meâ€¦|."

"Nightmares cannot hurt you. Besides, you seemed to be sleeping just fine a moment ago."

"Yaâ€¦|but you woke me upâ€¦|."

"Well you are too heavy for most of us to carry."

"That a crack on my...my weight?"

Sani giggled faintly. "No, but you are a big boy."

"Yesâ€¦|me a biiiig boy!" Zeno spread his arms wide, and then lost his balance.

"Oh noâ€¦|nonono!" Sani tried to hold him up, but ended up falling with him.

"Timmmber!" Zeno cried, flaying his arms and legs.

"Ughâ€¦|what am I going to do with you?" Sani grumbled as he somehow managed to pull himself out from under him.

"Hug me, squeeze me and love me forever?"

Sani blinked at him for a moment, then said with a smile. "If you did not currently smell like sewer, I might have done just that."

"Eh?" Zeno's confused expression just looked adorable.

* * *

><p>Sani managed to get Zeno home in one piece, with a bit of help from Sesai showing them less public routes to get there. Once there, Sani felt it would be a good idea if Zeno took a bath before tucking him in. The problem was, Zeno was starting to get slightly less drunk, and apparently when he wasn't so drunk he was a lot sillier. Getting to take his clothes off was easy, but then he started dancing. Sani didn't bother getting him to stop, instead deciding to get the bath ready.

There was no problem getting Zeno into said bath once the water was

ready, but Sani fast realized that Zeno wasn't keen on washing himself. He was more into sticking his head underwater and trying to blow bubbles. For his own safety, Sani decided to wash him himself to ensure the job got done, as well as to make sure the drunken idiot didn't accidentally drown himself.

After that was the fun of trying to dry Zeno off and into bed. only Zeno had just too much energy still and Sani was forced to let him dance it out: he didn't mind the view at all though. Eventually, Zeno either wore himself out, or he reached a stage of drunkenness where he was drowsyâ€|or both. When that happened it was easy as pie to tuck him in.

Afterward, Sani just watched him for a while, reflecting on recent events. _He can twist words with the best politicians, yetâ€|when it comes to his feelings for meâ€|._ Sani sighed, realizing he was as much to blame for this whole mess. _I should have been more patientâ€|tried to understand your reasoningâ€|. I am as much a fool as you are._ Tomorrow, he decided, once Zeno wakes up, he will do his part to fix things.

But firstâ€|, Sani thought as he caught a whiff of his own scent: the stench on Zeno had rubbed on him. _A shower..._

* * *

><p>The next morningâ€|

Zeno woke up with the mother of all headaches. With a loud moan he cracked open an eye and attempted to check the time, but his vision was a bit blurry. That cleared up after a few blinks and he noted it was nearly noon. _But what day is it?_ he wondered as he sat up. For that matter, how did he get back into his quarters? The last thing he remembered was being in some hallwayâ€|.

_Figure it out later, _he thought as he, slipped out of bed, only to discover he was completely nude. _How theâ€|_ Quickly, he checked his bed and the other one, finding them both empty: there was, however, a clean shirt and a set of pants lying on the other bed. That was only a minor relief though, as anyone he may have brought home with him could be elsewhere in the residence. _Gods, I hope it is not some human fangirlâ€|I'd never hear the end of it!_

"Good morning, Ambassador," Sesai said, appearing on a nearby console. Her tone was teasing. "Sleep well?"

"I guessâ€|.," Zeno grumbled as he pulled on the pants that were set out for him.

"Need I remind you that due to your political station it isâ€|."

"Do not start, Sesai. My headache is bad enough without your lecturing making it worse."

"Water and pain medication has been provided to take care of that detail," Sesai retorted curtly.

Zeno looked and indeed there was a bottle of water, along with a couple of extra strength painkillers, setting on the nightstand. He gladly took medication and gulped down the water. "OK, I need to

know. Who brought me back here? Luke?"

"Lieutenant McQuire was only involved in the act of organizing the return of your drunken person to your quarters, Ambassador."

"Alright, how many humans had to carry me?"

"Surprisingly, considering the level of intoxication you were at, you did not need to be carried. You were simply escorted back here—and not by humans."

Zeno paled. If it wasn't a human that helped him back, that means—

"Sesai—which Sangheili was it!" he demanded. Oh gods, the shame.

"He is in the next room and he expressed the desire to speak to you upon your awakening."

He gulped: chances are it was Rtas wanting to scold him. With his luck though, it was likely the Arbiter on a surprise visit, or worse, one of the other members of the High Council: those wrinkly bastards would love to use this against him.

"I will treasure the look of fear on your face for a very long time," Sesai quipped, a toothy grin on her draconian face.

"Shut up, Sesai," Zeno grumbled as he took a deep breath and stepped out into the living room. No point in delaying the inevitable, after all. Who he saw though was not who he was expecting. "Sa—Sa—Sani!" he gasped, his eyes wide.

"Hello, Zeno," Sani said softly. The paler Sangheili was just standing there in the middle of the living room, hands behind his back in a casual manner. His expression was a mix of longing and apprehension? Who could blame him though, after what he did to him.

"Sani—." Zeno's hearts were soaring at seeing him again. Yet, he also felt pain. Pain and guilt for what he did. He turned his head away, unable to face him. "I—I am sorry—," he said softly.

"For?" Sani's tone was unreadable, but he sounded close, very close. Looking at him he saw that Sani was now right in front of him.

"For hurting you—," he whispered, tears stinging his eyes. "I was a fool—."

Suddenly, Sani's hand rose up. Zeno flinched, expecting a slap, a slap he felt he really did deserve like the one Sani gave him the day he ran out. That wasn't what happened though, instead, Sani laid his hand on the side of his face, gently. "I know—," Sani said softly. "I forgive you."

"Huh? What—what?"

Sani's hand left his face, and in its place came a lonely coolness.

He watched as Sani turned away and walked away a bit, his hearts pained by the increased distance between them. "Luke came to me and told me everything," Sani explained. "He told me what you were unable toâ€¦at least when you were sober."

Zeno felt a blush rise to his cheeks. "Whaâ€¦what did I say while I was drunk?"

Sani turned back toward him, a faint smile on his face. "You confessed your love for me, though at the time, you thought I was Miko."

"Wha-well I did mention before that you two look a lot alikeâ€¦," Zeno said sheepishly. "Not that surprised I mistook you for him in my drunken stateâ€¦."

"Indeed." After a pause, Sani added. "I never stopped thinking about you, Zeno, even after you hurt me so."

"Ra-really?"

"Aye. My hearts were telling me that I gave up on you too easily and it was true, I did. You were only trying to protect me, like you always have, at the cost of your own hearts."

"Which did not turn out so well, for obvious reasonsâ€¦." Zeno blinked when something dawned on him. "Waitâ€¦If you were the one that brought me back here, were you also the one thatâ€¦."

"Stripped you?" Sani finished for him with another faint smile. "No, you did that yourself after asking you to. Howeverâ€¦." Sani blushed a little. "I did have to help you bathe."

Zeno flushed a dark purple. Just the thought of where Sani had to touch himâ€¦. "Did you really have to make me take a bath?" he asked.

"As filthy as you were, yes: there was no way I was going to let you into your bed like that. If you want a clue as to how bad you were, I had to have the clothes you were wearing at the time burned."

"Dear godsâ€¦."

"Yeah, it was bad. If you smell a lot of citrus in the air here, it's because I had to use a lot of air freshener. What is it with humans and using citrus in such a thing anyway?"

"Because it is a scent many humans like."

"Ahâ€¦I guess that makes sense." There was a brief pause before Sani spoke up again, this time his tone was very soft. "Soâ€¦What now?"

Zeno was at a loss. He was happy Sani came back and was willing to give him another chance, but he had no idea what to do now: last time he was in a serious relationship, Miko did most of the driving. "I do not knowâ€¦," he admitted. "I was not expecting to ever see you again because of my foolishnessâ€¦my prideâ€¦my fearâ€¦."

Sani stepped right up to him and put his hands lightly on his

shoulders. The warmth of his hands were electrifying, making him gasp faintly. "Nor do I," Sani admitted. "But I am sure we can figure it outâ€¦together." Then Sani nuzzled him, Zeno hearing a soft, reassuring purr coming from him. This time he did not brush him off, or snap at him: instead he let the warmth run through him and unlock his lonely hearts.

"Saniâ€¦," Zeno whispered as he finally wrapped his arms around him. Sani responded by wrapping his arms around his neck. They held each other like this for a long time, happy tears streaming down both their facesâ€¦.

13. Bonding

**Authors Note: **_Thanks to my beta for proofing this.

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<p>Chapter 12: Bonding

"I have a couple of things I have been meaning to ask you," Sani asked as they lay quietly together in Zeno's bed, cuddling each other. They had spent most of the day talking and cuddling, getting to know each other more. Sani was currently tracing the edges of his tattoo lightly with a claw, making Zeno shiver slightly from the sensation.

"And what would those be?" Zeno asked, the lids of his eyes starting to droop.

"Well, for one, that scar on your backâ€¦."

"Oh." Zeno immediately felt solemn. "The blademaster of my keep gave that to me, while he was trying to kill me."

Sani's eyes widened. "Why?"

"He caught me practicing my sword forms, when he had forbidden me to do so because he felt I was not worthy of learning the art of combat."

"But all Sangheili know how to fight, even every Hilvum is taught the art of combat," Sani said, confused. "Why did he think you unworthy?"

"Even to this day I am not completely certain, but I think the fact I am a semo and that an illness rendered me sterile are big factors in it."

"I see. He must have made life rough for you then."

"Initially, until the kaidon of the time, Kou, took me under his arm. He trained me when he could and kept Ley from trying to end me."

"Kou must be proud of what you have become."

"I will never know if he is or not," Zeno said softly. "He died shortly after I became a member of the SpecOps, years ago."

"Ohâ€¦I am sorry. He must have meant a lot to you."

"He didâ€¦," Zeno said sorrowfully. "I still think about him sometimes, wondering why he took such an interest in me when surely there were other's that were more worthy of his time." He sighed. "Now I may never know. Why did it have to be him to dieâ€¦and not Ley?"

"'Everything happens for a reason', I believe you once said," Sani pointed out. "I am certain you will find out someday." Sani then lifted his head enough to nuzzle him on the cheek. The gesture brightened his mood immediately, Zeno rumbling a purr in response as he smiled.

"Hmâ€¦I have a question now," Zeno said softly.

"Hey, I still have another question," Sani protested lightheartedly.

Zeno chuckled. "You can ask it after this one," he said. "I remember what you told me about your keep, how all the responsibilities are divided into _soras_?"

"Yeah?"

"Which _sora_ takes care of the young?"

"All of them."

"Excuse me?"

It was Sani's turn to chuckle. "Members from each _sora_ help out with the rearing of the little ones. There is a regular rotation within each caste on whose turn it is to tend to them. When they are old enough, the caretakers take turns 'fostering' them for a couple months in each _sora_."

"Ah, I see now. That is how you ensure each child is exposed to the duties of each caste."

"Correct. Can Iâ€¦?"

"Yes, Sani, you can ask your other question now," Zeno said with a laugh.

"Do you remember that one rule you told me? About showering?"

Zeno could already feel a blush start to rise to his cheeks as he knew where this was going. "Yeah?"

"You have something against wet skin?"

"Ahhhâ€¦against? Noâ€¦For? Definitely soâ€¦."

"I do not understand."

The blush on his cheeks was in full force now. "I have a thing for wet skin, as in, it turns me on."

It took a moment for Sani to get it: when he did, he started blushing as well. "Oooh!" he said, clearly understanding now. "I will have to remember that when we get to that stage." There was a slight mischievous grin on that.

"You think you will be able to handle it? Consideringâ€¦."

Sani visibly shuddered, Zeno feeling bad for reminding him about the trauma he went through. "We will cross that bridge when we come to it," Sani said his tone somber. "I am sure we will figure out a way, ifâ€¦thatâ€¦proves to be a hindrance."

"Fair enough. It would not be a good idea to rush things anyway."

"Don't rush things he saysâ€¦when we are lying together in bed already," Sani said teasingly.

"Hey, we are both still clothed and neither of us are even under the covers."

"And how long will either of that last?"

Sani had a sly grin on his face, to which Zeno just chuckled. "Patience, my sweet," he said softly, giving Sani an affectionate nuzzle. "We should strengthen our bond in other ways first."

"Yeah, you are probably right." Sani yawned then, his mandibles opening wide.

"Tired? How can that be? All we have been doing is lazing about and chatting," Zeno said, a teasing smirk on his face.

"Bonding can be tiring, I guess."

"Ha! If you want bonding to be exhausting wait until we start getting really intimate."

"I thought you did not want to rush things?" Now Sani was smirking.

"Warso." Zeno licked his forehead.

"So are you. And you are looking tired yourself."

"Yeah, but at least I have the excuse of still having a slight hangover."

"Longest hangover I have ever heard of."

"Well, I did get drunk again...on love."

"Oh Zeno you are so silly, what am I going to do with you?"

In response Zeno just pulled him closer. The pair curled up in each

other's arms and it wasn't long before they both drifted off.

* * *

><p>He was once again staring down that black and purple armored figure, but he was at a loss as to how to get past him. Politely asking didn't work, nor did attacking it immediately: every time he tried, it would incapacitate him, and then kill the boy that was in the room with him. The only thing he hadn't tried was having the boy help somehow, but he was hesitant to ask the boy for fear of getting him killed.

But he gets killed anyway, _he reminded himself. So what would be the difference? The thing is, how could the boy help? Then an idea came to him. With a smile, he approached the boy and knelt down to his level. "Hey there," he said softly. "I have an idea on how to get by that jerk that keeps killing us, but I will need your help."_

"_How can I possibly help? He is so big and scaryâ€|," the boy said, his voice trembling._

"_This is how." Zeno then whispered his idea into the boy's ear hole. The boy's eyes widened and he smiled as he nodded in understanding._

He then stood up and faced the armored figure once more. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the boy getting into position. When the figure noticed him that's when he acted.

"_Hey!" he called out. "I figured something out about you!" _

_The figure looked at him once more and growled lowly: "Oh really?" _

"_Your father was a Kig-Yar and your mother smelled of Brute droppings!"_

"_What!" the figure roared, clearly insulted._

"_Yeah. You are also so ugly and smelly that it is no wonder they had you assigned to this shithole! You are an insult to their senses!"_

"_Why youâ€|!" The figure charged at him with a roar, sword in hand. It wouldn't make it to him though, as he tripped over the boy, whom had dashed into its path and knelt down. Not having expected this, the figure landed face first on the floor, its sword flying from its grip._

He pounced immediately, grabbing the bastard by the neck and putting it in a choke hold. The figure thrashed and growled, trying to break free, but he held firm. Eventually the thrashing slowed, and then stopped completely. When that happened, the body disintegrated, leaving only the armor behind.

"_He was a nasty piece of work," he grumbled, kicking the now empty armor pieces. "So arrogant. Hey, kid, you alright?" _

_As he looked over to where the boy should have been, he got a bit of

a shock. In the boy's place was a man, whom smiled at him sweetly. He knew that smileâ€|that faceâ€|. _

"_Thank you," the man said softly. "We are both free now." _

Before he could ask what the man meant, he disappeared in a shower of white glittering smoke.

* * *

><p>Zeno awoke to the feel of another warm body laying partially on him. Opening his eyes he smiled when he saw Sani, whom was still sleeping soundly with his head on Zeno's chest. He understood now, what the dreams were telling him. That he had been holding himself back and hurting not only himself, but Sani, in the process. In those dreams he defeated each of his major demons that were holding him back: sorrow, guilt, pride and fear. While each of those 'demons' were still there in some form, they were no longer a hindrance, no longer keeping him from feeling love. With Sani, he knew he was ready for the future at last.<p>

* * *

><p>A couple of weeks laterâ€|

Zeno and Sani were sitting next to each other in one of the recreational lounges, leaning into each other as they looked out at the planet below. They had decided that Sani should stay at his own apartment for the time being, though he often spent the night at Zeno's anyway. Zeno figured that by the time the _Shadow of Intent_ arrived, Sani could move in completely.

As for a job for Sani, Sesai had pointed out that there was an ambassador aid position that had never been filled. Sani was a bit wary about doing administrative stuff, but he was picking things up quickly. Plus he got to spend more time with Zeno as a bonus. Granted, Zeno quickly made it a rule to minimize PDA between them while they were on-duty, which Sani seemed to understand.

Zeno was a bit averse to showing much of it when _off-duty_ as well in all honesty, at least when out in public. This was of course due to the other Sangheili onboard the station. Not that minimizing such contact helped any, as the rumors and gossip were already flying through the station. It was only a matter of time before one of the bolder Sangheili confronted him about so-called 'inappropriate behavior'.

Let them bitch and whine, Zeno thought as he looked down at Sani, whom had his head resting on his shoulder. _I am happy again, I do not care what they think._

"Zenoâ€|," Sani said as the smaller Sangheili sat up.

"Yes Sani?"

"Caâ€|Can I try something?"

Zeno tilted his head as he looked at him. Sani looked nervous, yet there was also eagerness in his eyes. "Sure, what is it?" he said, trusting him.

Then Sani did something unexpected, sudden. He leaned forward, arching his head upward in the process, and touched his snout with his. Zeno was too shocked to move at first, then he realized how warm it made it feel, even warmer than his touch. Purring now, he leaned into it, savoring it. He could smell his scent strongly this way and while it had the muskiness of a male, he could now detect a faint hint of sweetness.

Then, Sani pulled away, his face a deep shade of purple. "Oh myâ€|," he breathed quietly.

"Indeedâ€|" Zeno agreed. "Whaâ€|What was that?"

"Iâ€|I do not know the word for it, but it was something I have seen human couples doâ€|with their mouths."

"Oh, I believe the humans call that a 'kiss'â€|."

"Ahâ€|I can see why humans seem to like doing it so much. Itâ€|felt nice."

"Yesâ€|Yes it did," Zeno said as he pulled him close. "I would not mind having another...in factâ€|."

Sani giggled softly, the blush still on his cheeks as they leaned closer to 'kiss' again, only for a harsh voice to shatter the moment.

"Cease this disgusting display at once!"

Zeno whipped his head toward the source, an Ultra ranked Sangheili in full armor, a bit angry that someone would interrupt such a tender moment between them. He had to remind himself that the Ultra likely didn't recognize him due to the silhouetting effect the planet outside had, not to mention Zeno wasn't one to brag about his status while in civilian attire anyway. "What business is it yours to interrupt our private moment," he said, a faint growl in his voice.

"We are Sangheili," the Ultra growled. "We do not show such outward displays of affection in public, especially with another male!" The tone of disgust in the man's voice was obvious.

"Why do you care who I am attracted to? How does it affect you?"

"It is unnatural and does nothing to further your bloodline."

"Unnatural? Being a semo is about as unnatural as is the need to breathe," Zeno argued. "As for my bloodline, I cannot further it anyway."

"Then why were you allowed to live at all?"

At this point Zeno stood up, stepped away from the bench and into more proper lighting. Behind him, he could hear Sani rise as well. Due to the widening of his eyes, Zeno knew the man now recognized him. "Because I proved my worth to our people otherwise," Zeno replied.

"Ambassador..." The Ultra looked surprised and taken back.

"Why the surprised look? Me being a semo is no secret."

The Ultra looked away, the expression on his face making it evident that he had a few things to say, but dare not. Then the man noticed Sani. "You! You are that runaway!"

"What of it?" Sani said guardedly.

"Soâ€|this is why the ambassador is protecting you," the Ultra growled. "You are in his bedâ€|how disgusting. To think the ambassador would stoop to accepting such 'favours'."

Zeno growled lowly and then decked the man. The Ultra landed on his rump, rubbing his snout with a shocked expression on his face. "First offâ€|," Zeno growled as he stood over the man, his posture aggressive. "Our feelings for each other are genuine and mutual. Second, we are not at that stage yet and third: what I do in my private life is _none of your damn business!_ Do I make myself _clear!_"

"Crystalâ€|," the Ultra growled lowly.

"Goodâ€|now get out of my sight!"

The Ultra bristled, like he was going to retaliate, but then thought better of it and left. Zeno watched him go, his blood still high as he glared daggers into the man's back. So intent he was on the man that he jumped when Sani touched his arm.

"Zeno?" Sani asked.

"I am fineâ€|," Zeno said, taking a couple of breaths to calm himself. "I could have handled that a lot better though. I would have rather you did not see my ugly side."

"I was not aware you _had_ an ugly side, Zeno," Sani said sweetly. "Every part of you looks handsome to me."

"It was a figure of speech, sweet," Zeno said with a chuckle.

"I know," Sani said with a smile. "Besides, that man had no right to speak to us like that."

"Yeahâ€|but stillâ€|I hope this does not come and bite me in the ass laterâ€|." Zeno shook his head: nothing he can do about it now. "Come, I think it is best we head home."

* * *

><p>As they walked back to the ambassador suite, Sani pondered on what just happened and what it could mean for him. It was the first time he had seen Zeno truly angry and he had to admit he had been a little frightened by the display, even though the anger was not directed at him. Must be due to my 'experiences' with Runi, Sani mused.

Still, just how prone to violence was Zeno when he was angry? He

realized it may be a good idea to find out now before things got too deep between them. "Zeno?" Sani called out as they reached the door to the suite.

"Yes?" Zeno replied.

"Do you get violent often when you are angry?"

Zeno looked at him, a perplexed look on his face before it dawned on him why Sani was asking. "It depends, to be honest," Zeno responded with a sigh as he punched in the door code. "You have probably noticed I am usually not quick to anger."

"Aye, I have," Sani admitted as they walked through the door. "Only other time I have seen you close to being angry was when Joran was chasing me. Though now I do remember Henun mentioning that you can go as far as to kill someone when angry."

"Again, it largely depends. During all my years, the only _friendly_ I actually killed was Yuteri and for that I was not really angry. Vengeful, yes, angry, no. In fact, the worse I have done to a fellow Sangheili when angry was what I did to that Juwi bastard."

"Juwi? Who was he?"

"He was another member of recon," Zeno explained. "Was Henun's partner in fact, only he hated semos with a passion. That Miko and I loved to play pranks on him did not help matters any."

"What happened?" Sani wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"He tried to kill me once, during a brawl in the mess hall," Zeno continued. "After that, Miko and I decided to stop playing pranks on him, in the hopes his hate would cool down. Unfortunately, Juwi's hatred still escalated. He rigged a conduit to explode when Miko and I walked by, Miko got the brunt of the blast, which resulted in nasty burns on his chest and left arm. It was Henun that told me it was Juwi that set it up and I decided to do a bit of 'eye for an eye'."

"Wha-what did you do?"

"I slipped into his room, rendered him unconscious, and then used my swords to 'draw' designs on his hide."

"Oh my goodness."

"My superiors suspected it was me that did that to him, but could not prove it or at least did not try to prove it." Zeno chuckled a bit at some memory. "It turned out, Juwi was getting pretty bad at his job so the commander was going to see about having him removed from recon anyway. The new 'attempted murder' and 'tampering with equipment' charges just made it easier to get rid of him. He was sent to one of our penitentiaries, where he was quickly put into solitary if I remember correctly."

"So he is still there I take it?"

Zeno shrugged. "Last I heard, _Decided Heart_, the planet the penitentiary is on, was attacked by Brutes during the Schism. I have

no idea if the penitentiary even still stands."

"So there is a chance Juwi may resurfaceâ€¦".

"He is a marked Sangheili: it would be difficult for him to get anywhere without drawing attention to himself."

"I hope you are rightâ€¦". Sani thought a moment before asking. "So what usually angers you?"

"Oh, let's seeâ€¦" Zeno started counting off on his fingers.

"Bigotry, discrimination, sometimes really persistent assholesâ€¦but the big one is when someone threatens or harms someone I care about. That is when all bets are off. Only been in a full rage twice so far, thankfully."

"I think I can guess the reason for one of thoseâ€¦Mikoâ€¦".

"You would be correct." Zeno's voice had a hint of sorrow. "It was right after he was impaled on a sword by a Brute. There wasâ€¦not much left of said Brute when the rage finally passed. The second time was not long after that, during a raid to take back a ship. A Brute Chieftain ambushed the remains of the squad I was in: the commander was one of them. During that fight, I suffered a flashback to when Miko was killed. The rage did not last long though, due to the Chieftain knocking sense back into me: he was not happy I had sliced his hammer into two pieces."

"I probably would not either if I had been that Chieftain," Sani said with a slight giggle before turning serious. "So I do not have to worry about youâ€¦".

"Taking my anger out on you?" Zeno finished for him, to which Sani nodded. "Do not worry, Sani: I have never turned my anger onto the ones I love. I leave to go vent my anger on something else instead."

Sani sighed with relief. "That is good to know," Sani said as he embraced him.

"Glad I could ease your mind, sweet." Zeno said softly in his earhole as Sani felt his arms wrap around him. "Hopefully, you will never have to see me in Hulk Smash mode."

"Wha?" Sani pulled away to look at him, a perplexed look on his face. Though it was hard to see due to the coloration of his skin, Sani did see Zeno had started to blush.

"Ahâ€¦sorryâ€¦it is a reference to something I read once in a comic book."

"You and your study of human culture," Sani said with a teasing smile.

"Hey, some good things come out of it, like thisâ€¦". At that Zeno leaned forward and kissed him.

Sani purred as he kissed Zeno in kind. Yes, human culture does indeed have some good thingsâ€¦.

14. Playtime

Authors Note: Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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* * *

<p>Chapter 13: Playtime

Sani walked with a brisk pace as he headed back to the Ambassador suite, eager to get home. Well, technically it wasn't home since he hadn't officially moved in yet, but he stayed there most nights anyway. How could he not? He loved Zeno with all his hearts.

Hard to believe we have only known each other for almost three months, Sani thought with a smile as he reached the suite and typed in the pass code for the door. Zeno had told him earlier in the day that he had something to show him when he arrived and his hearts were hammering with anticipation. He almost didn't even bother to stop by his apartment to change into casual clothing first: he only did so because he knew trying to cuddle in the new full set of armor Zeno had commissioned for him was awkward.

"Ah, just in time, sweet," Zeno's cheerful voice greeted him as he opened the door. "I just finished setting up."

"Just what are you up to?" Sani said as he looked around. He didn't see anything different at first glance in the living room.

"Mmm, you will see soon enough," Zeno said, smiling. "But first, let's eat."

Dinner consisted of a single large plate full of various earthen meats cut into bite-sized pieces in a slightly tangy sauce. That in on itself wasn't too new, as Zeno had ordered it before, but the addition of a table cloth and a pair of tall, lit candles was. Sani couldn't help but chuckle as he sat down: he knew what had to have brought this on.

"Been reading up on human traditions again, love?" he asked. "This time on romance and courtship?"

"Guilty as charged," Zeno said. "Just trying to keep thing interesting for us."

"Am I getting boring for you already?" Sani said in a teasing tone. "My, not even three months yet!"

Zeno laughed heartily. "Certainly not, my sweet! I just like to try things."

"Indeed. Makes me curious as to what else you will experiment with."

"Even I cannot tell you that: a lot of that is usually a spur of the

moment."

"Well, in that case, things certainly should not get dull between us anytime soon."

"Indeed."

They took their time eating, wanting to savor the finely cooked meal. There was little chatter, besides some giggling when they fed one another off their own utensils. When they were done, they cuddled for a bit on the balcony, letting their meal digest before heading for bed. It was upon entering the bedroom that Sani saw a major difference.

The two single beds had been removed and replaced by a Sangheilian style double bed. Unlike human beds, it was bowl shaped, with one side lower than the other for ease of entry and exit. The bedding looked to be traditional materials from Sanghelios, though the pillows were human. Still, it was a pleasant surprise overall: no more crowding into a small, human designed bed for them!

"What do you think?" Zeno asked.

"Took you long enough," Sani replied, a slight nagging tone in his voice as he put his hands on his hips, though he was smiling.

"Was not easy getting one of these things shipped here," Zeno admitted. "Been trying on and off since I arrived here. I guess the quartermasters did not think it was a _priority_ itemâ€|."

"Well, it is here now," Sani said, giving him a lick on the cheek. "And I am sure we will have lots of time to enjoy it."

"Indeed. Go on ahead and get in, I want to wash up a bit first before joining you."

"One of these days I will bathe with you," Sani said as Zeno walked into the bathroom.

"Yes, indeedâ€|and a part of me cannot wait for when that day comes."

Sani smiled at the thought as he watched the bathroom door close. He then stripped off his clothing and climbed into their new bed, loving the feel of the soft bedding underneath him. As he lay there, he started wondering what mating was truly like: he was not a virgin unfortunately, thanks to Runi, and his past experiences were all negative. He really wanted a positive mating experience and he knew Zeno would give that to him, when they were both ready for it.

His wondering turned to fantasizing, which in turn quickly started becoming erotic. Images of Zeno mounting him and filling his body with pleasure flashed through his mind, causing a reaction with his physical body. He didn't even realize just how his daydreaming was affecting him until Zeno returned.

"Oh my," Zeno's voice cooed, breaking his daydream. "I certainly hope you were thinking about me."

Sani blinked at him, then looked down at himself and his eyes widened

to see his erect shaft. "Oh myâ€¦," Sani breathed, feeling himself turn purple from embarrassment. "Iâ€¦I really got myself worked up didn't I?"

"Yes, indeed. Not that there is anything wrong with that of course." Zeno removed the towel that was around his waist and slid into bed next to him.

"I-I think I should go take a quick cold shower before we settle inâ€¦," Sani said softly as he started to get out, but Zeno gently coaxed him back down.

"It would be a shame to waste such a beautiful thingâ€¦," Zeno said softly, running his fingers lightly down his chest.

Sani shuddered as Zeno's caress went past his chest and over his abdomen, just missing his still erect shaft. He realized quickly that his body was much more sensitive while he was aroused and every touch just made him want more. Zeno seemed willing to finally cross a line neither had wanted to cross before, but was he really ready for it? "I do not know, Zenoâ€¦," Sani gasped as Zeno licked his neck. "I-I do want itâ€¦but I amâ€¦."

"Afraid?" Zeno finished for him, Sani nodding in confirmation. "Do not worry. With your history I know better than to penetrate you on the first round. I know of other waysâ€¦to pleasure youâ€¦."

Sani was struck nearly speechless by the comment, before remembering that Zeno did have a real partner before him. Of course Zeno would know a lot more about the business of lovemaking and pleasuring someone: the thought made Sani very curiousâ€¦and longing. "C-can you show me?" he asked, his voice quivering.

"Of course, my sweet," Zeno said with a smile. "I will take it slow and if you feel uncomfortable at anytime, just tell me to stop and I will, OK?"

Sani nodded vigorously in agreement.

* * *

><p>Zeno smiled as he lightly stroked Sani's chest and belly, watching as the paler Sangheili trembled at his light touch. He hadn't planned on doing anything this intimate tonight, but when opportunity knocks as they sayâ€¦provided Sani can handle it of course. Sani was rather receptive to this so far, but there was no telling how far he could comfortably go before things became too much.

So Zeno went slowly, sticking with the caresses for the time being. After a while, he added nuzzling and kissing to the mix, while continuing to caress him without touching his shaft. Sani was quite enjoying this, if his moaning and purring was any indication. He was getting frisky too, as Sani's hands were started to rub his back, hands that seemed to have some skill to them for this kind of foreplay themselves.

Better step it up, Zeno thought with a purr. Before I get too distracted. With that thought, he stroked around Sani's shaft, teasingly, before finally caressing the shaft itself.

"Oh! Oooohhâ€|," Sani gasped, followed by a few rapid pants. Zeno held his position, watching Sani's reaction carefully: it was quite obvious Sani had never been handled like this before.

"How does this feel?" Zeno asked him as he rubbed him up and down slowly. Sani only moaned in response, to which Zeno chuckled and licked him passionately. "This is nothingâ€|wait until you feel what comes next."

So Zeno continued to work him: building him up, only to stop when Sani was about to release. He did this several times, each time allowing Sani to come closer to the brink. When he realized Sani could not take much more, he let him release.

Sani cried loudly, his back arching as he released. Zeno stayed with him, holding him close until he was finished and the crash came. He didn't care about the mess as he pulled him even closer, chest to chest, as Sani whimpered and panted, seemingly confused at what just happened. Zeno purred reassuringly, nuzzling and licking Sani's neck as the smaller Sangheili started to recover.

"Well?" Zeno asked when he felt Sani was recovered enough to speak.

"By the Spiritsâ€|," Sani panted. "I-I have never felt anything like that beforeâ€|."

"I felt the same way, the first time it was done to me," Zeno admitted.

"It felt so wonderfulâ€|yetâ€|I feel so tired nowâ€|."

"That is normal, especially for the first time," Zeno assured him. "Go ahead and sleep, my sweet. It has been a long day."

"Butâ€|what about you?" Sani asked, a hint of guilt in his voice. "It would not be fair if you did notâ€|"

Zeno silenced him with a kiss before pulling the covers over them both. "Do not worry about me, sweet," he said softly, feeling sleep start to overcome him. "For tonight at least, that you enjoyed yourself is good enough for me."

* * *

><p>The early next morningâ€|

Sani yawned as he opened his eyes and looked at the time. _Damn, over an hour early,_ he thought with a frown. Looking down, he saw that Zeno was still fast asleep and a smile creased his face as he remembered what they did, or more specifically, what Zeno did just before they fell asleep last night. A smile that turned into a frown when he remembered that he didn't get a chance to return the favor. Despite Zeno's assurances, he still felt guilty about it.

Maybe I can return it now, he thought as he glanced at the time again. Normally they woke up about an hour from now, which would give him plenty of time to have some fun. The problem, though, was that Sani felt reluctant to awaken Zeno for this: he looked so cute as he

slept. Another problem was that even if he did awaken Zeno, he had no idea what to do after that, particularly how to get Zeno aroused in the first place. Well, he did know one way, but he didn't feel like getting wet right now.

One thing at a time, Sani told himself as he leaned down and nuzzled Zeno's neck. Zeno moaned softly, but that was about it, so Sani tried nudging him on the face instead. Success, Zeno stirred and opened a sleepy eye to look at him.

"What is it, Sani?" Zeno asked groggily. "Something happen?"

"Not yet," Sani said softly, feeling a little guilty about awakening him. "But I am hoping something could happen."

"Oh?" Zeno propped himself up on one elbow. "What would that be?"

Sani lowered his head, feeling the heat of a blush rise to his face. "I wanted to return the favor you know for what you did to me last night."

"Now?" Zeno's eyes widened.

"It is only an hour before we normally get up."

"An hour I usually sleep through."

Sani winced, the tone of the comment suggesting that Zeno wasn't in the mood for any fun right now. "Forget it," Sani muttered softly as he turned over so his back was to Zeno. "I will ask another time. Sorry for waking you."

There was a very brief silence before Zeno spoke again. "Sani I am sorry that did not come out well at all." Sani felt a hand on his arm. "It is a rare individual that can think clearly when they first wake up and I am not one of those." There was another brief pause before Zeno added. "So uh what did you have in mind?"

Sani turned over so he was facing Zeno. "Are you sure, Zeno?" he asked. "I do not want to force you."

"I denied you the opportunity last night, which was selfish of me. I want to make that up to you."

"A-alright though I have no idea how to start this off," Sani admitted, blushing slightly.

"Well," Zeno said with a broad smile. "Think back on what I did to you last night."

"Yes, I remember that but you had the advantage of me already being um erect."

"And you are going to let that little detail stop you?"

Sani blinked at him, then smiled. "Of course not."

With a chuckle, Zeno lay down on his back and put his hands behind his head. Sani removed the covers off him, then started to rub Zeno's

chest, Zeno purring in approval. Encouraged, Sani started rubbing lower and lower, until he reached Zeno's groin. Now Zeno was moaning and it didn't take long for his shaft to emerge.

Oh myâ€|, Sani thought when he saw the size of it. _What am I going to do with this?_ Just stroking it didn't seem it would be enough to him and he was so worried about this that he stopped rubbing.

"Mmm, do not stop now," Zeno purred. "You are doing great."

Sani muttered an apology as he resumed stroking, only to stop again when he remembered something. Something that gave him an idea. "Zeno, sit up for me please," he said.

* * *

><p>Zeno raised an eye ridge at him, but sat up as requested. Sani sat up himself and kissed him, the paler male's hands rubbing his chest again. "Mmmâ€|do not neglect it now," Zeno teased. "It is feeling lonely alreadyâ€|."<p>

Sani giggled faintly. "Do not worry, I will not. Keep your eyes closed for me, alright? And try to stay stillâ€|."

"Mmmâ€|what are you plotting, my sweet?" Zeno said as he closed his eyes

"Something I hope will feel really goodâ€|." Was the only thing Sani said before Zeno felt his hand upon his shaft once more. A hand that was joined by something else, something wet.

"Ooohâ€|," Zeno moaned, really liking this. "Licking me are you? Have not tried that beforeâ€|."

Sani was apparently too focused on the task at hand, for he didn't answer. Zeno didn't mind though, as this felt amazing. As time went on though, he became aware that this licking wasn't quite 'normal': Sangheilian tongues cannot extend _that_ far out of their mouths. Against Sani's request, Zeno opened an eye to see what exactly Sani was doing, only to snap both eyes open in shock.

All he saw was the back of Sani's neck and head over where his shaft _should_ be, which meant only one thing. If he remembered right, the term the humans used for it was a 'blowjob', but the problem where was that Sangheili teeth were sharp, very sharp, and the thought of all those sharp teeth so close to his shaft was frightening. He had to fight the reflex to knock Sani away, his logical mind knowing that if he did that, some of those teeth would surely graze his member, at the very least.

You are ruining this for him, he told himself, taking a few deep breaths to calm himself. Sani, despite how frightening it was, was doing a very good job at not pricking him with his teeth and the longer he continued without doing so the more Zeno relaxed and started to enjoy this again. Soon he had his eyes closed again and had pretty much forgotten how Sani was doing this.

"Sa-Saniâ€|I am going toâ€|," Zeno moaned when he was about to hit the peak. He felt Sani stay put for a bit longer before pulling away and letting his hand finish him off. Zeno's release was intense,

reminding him of how long it had been since he had done something like this. He felt Sani stay with him, holding him like Zeno held him last night. Finally it was over and Zeno curled up with Sani in his arms. "Thatâ€¦," he breathed, trying to catch his breath. "That was incredibleâ€¦."

"Yesâ€¦but I could tell you peeked at one point," Sani said with a knowing smirk.

"How?"

"You shrank a bit."

Zeno blushed. "I admit I let my curiosity get the better of me."

"And you found out _why_ I told you to keep your eyes closed."

"Heh, yeahâ€¦should have guessed it with you telling me that and to stay still and such. Where did you learn that anyway?"

At that Sani tucked his head under Zeno's chin and his tone was a mix of disgust and defiance. "Runi tried to force me to do that to him once, only it did not turn out so wellâ€¦for him."

Zeno immediately could guess why. "You bit himâ€¦."

Sani giggled, only this giggle had a proud, slightly malicious tone. "Aye. It was the only time I resisted and he did not retaliate afterward. Runi never tried that stunt on me again and he actually stayed away from me for a whole week while he healed: it was a very good week for meâ€¦."

"Uh huhâ€¦mental note: do not have Sani give you a blowjob when he is mad at you."

Sani laughed heartily. "Oh Zeno, you do not have to worry about that. I would never intentionally bite you. Unlessâ€¦you want me toâ€¦."

"Hell noâ€¦I am no masochist." They both shared a laugh at that.

15. Runi

Authors Note: *_Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 14: Runi

Zeno yawned and stretched, feeling reluctant to get up today. Beside him Sani also began to stir and with a faint chuckle, Zeno wrapped his arms around him and licked his neck. Sani giggled and managed to

twist around enough to nip him playfully on a mandible. A brief spout of playful roughhousing ensued before both finally sat up in the bed and Zeno was finding it hard not to watch Sani as they dressed.

It had been nearly four months since Zeno coaxed a slightly thin, timid and depressed Sani from a supply room. Now, Sani was a lean but well built young male whose skin glistened with health and nearly glowed with self-confidence. Zeno sometimes could not keep his hands off this handsome male and it seemed Sani felt the same way, for they both often spent long moments just holding each other.

He knew, however, that Sani likely still had some side-effects from the abuse he suffered: one doesn't typically get over something like that in just four months. One sign was that Sani was still reluctant to have actual intercourse, though Zeno personally did not want to rush that step anyway: things had advanced rather quickly as is.

"You going to get dressed as well, Zeno?" Sani's voice said, breaking his train of thought. "Or are you going to continue to stare at my ass?"

"Well it is a very nice ass," Zeno replied with a coy grin, the grin growing wider when Sani blushed.

"Oh you!" Sani said, pushing him playfully.

"You are not innocent yourself, Sani," Zeno said with a laugh. "I have caught you staring at my rear a few times."

"Who me?" Sani put on an innocent look, which Zeno saw through instantly.

"Yes you," Zeno said as he pulled Sani into an embrace.

"Well, you do have a very nice ass," Sani said, echoing Zeno's earlier comment.

"Yes, yes I do," Zeno said as he kissed Sani, Sani returning the gesture. "You knowâ€¦it is going to be a light day today, I do not think they would mind if we show up a little late."

"You are so naughty, Zeno," Sani giggled. "Have we not done just that a couple times this week already?"

"Which means they should be used to it by now." Zeno's grin was very broad.

Sani laughed and leaned in to kiss him once more when Sesai popped up on the console.

"Good morning, Ambassador," the AI said cheerfully.

"Aw, Sesai, could you have waited about thirty minutes?" Zeno groaned.

"I apologize, Ambassador, but I needed to inform you that the Shadow of Intent has arrived in system and will have guests arriving by phantom within a couple of hours."

Both Zeno and Sani groaned with a mix of disappointment and apprehension. Zeno knew Second Master Ruro would likely want to have a chat with him and for Sani, he knew Runi would be looking for him. It looked like the time had finally arrived to see if the training Sani undertook would pay off and Sani now looked nervous. "You have been training for this moment for nearly four months, love," Zeno said to him reassuringly. "You can handle him."

"Physically, perhaps, but mentally?" Sani countered, a telling quiver in his voice.

"You can do it, I believe in you." Zeno nuzzled him affectionately, which immediately lightened Sani's mood. "Come, we best finish getting dressed and get something to eat before our _visitors_ arrive."

"I do not know if I can eat anything: I seem to have suddenly lost my appetite," Sani muttered. "This day feels like it arrived too soonâ€¦".

Zeno found himself agreeing with him there.

* * *

><p>A couple of hours laterâ€¦|

Three phantoms had arrived from the _Shadow of Intent_ and Zeno and Sani stood in the hanger bay, greeting the new arrivals. So far he hadn't see any sign of Second Master Ruro or Runi, though in Runi's case Zeno wasn't entirely sure what he looked like, despite the description Sani gave him. All he knew was that he was nearly tall as himself and heavily built: which seemed to match a number of minors that arrived here. _I really should have asked Sani for a better description,_ Zeno thought.

As it turned out, he knew when Runi had finally shown himself by a sudden change in Sani's demeanor. Despite the nervousness and anxiety he had when he first heard the news of the ship's arrival, Sani had been acting fairly calm and confident as he greeted the guests. Now, however, his gaze was affixed in one direction, a slight tremor of anxiety in his mandibles and hint of fear in his yellow-green eyes. Looking where he was staring, Zeno spotted Runi himself.

Sani certainly hadn't exaggerated Runi's size: the man really was nearly as tall as Zeno and more heavily built. Runi's red-brown skin seemed to match the fiery aggression in his golden eyes and overall posture reflected the arrogance that plagued their people. He watched as Runi slowly walked away from the Phantom's grav lift, not acting like he was in any hurry. That changed once he spotted them, his stride quickening as his expression turned darker and more aggressive.

"Zenoâ€¦|," Sani said, his voice having a noticeable quiver in it. "Promise me you will let me do this on my own?"

Zeno looked down at him, then at the approaching Runi for a moment before looking back at Sani. Despite his obvious nervousness, Sani seemed willing to try to handle this alone: Zeno couldn't help but allow himself a small smile of pride at that knowledge. "I promise not to interfere," Zeno said. "So long as things do not get out of

hand."

"Thank you."

By the time Runi was twenty feet away from them, his expression had softened and Sani knew immediately that he was going to try to sweet talk him. _Do not fall for it,_ he told himself. _It is a lie, all of it._ Sani could feel the anxiety and fear building the closer Runi got, but he was able to keep it off his face, displaying an expression of indifference instead. Runi finally stopped his approach about five feet away, a bit close to Sani's liking, and Runi made an obvious show of looking both him and Zeno up and down, as if judging them.

"What is this armor get up?" Runi asked, his tone sounding genuinely curious. "Never seen it before in all the times I have come here."

"This," Sani gestured toward Zeno, whom was watching Runi with a cold, measured gaze. "Is Zeno 'Ribal, the current Ambassador ofâ€|"

"I do not _care_ about _him_," Runi interrupted with a snarl. "I am talking about _you._"

Out of the corner of his eye, Sani saw Zeno bristle but remain silent: such blatant disrespect. "You would do well to treat the Ambassador with respect, Runi," Sani retorted with a faint growl of his own.

"Whatever. What is that armor you are wearing, Sani?" Runi persisted. "It is no minor armor I have ever seen before."

"This," Sani pointed to his blue and off-white armor. "Is the armor of the Ambassador's Aide."

"So you went and got another job when you already _have_ one on the _Shadow of Intent._"

"This job is the only one I have," Sani corrected. "I was transferred here."

"Brute dung!" Runi snapped. "Shipmaster Ruro said those documents were forged!"

"I assure you they were not," Zeno countered. "And Ruro is only _Second Master_. Rtas 'Vadum is still _Shipmaster_ of the _Shadow of Intent_."

"Shut up, I am not talking to you."

At that, Zeno lowered his head and growled deeply, his hands clenching and unclenching. Sani put a hand on his shoulder to calm him. "Zenoâ€|remember," he said to him softly. It took a moment, but Zeno did relax his posture, though he was still glaring daggers at Runi. "It is clear you do not have any respect for your superiors, Runi," Sani said, turning his gaze back to Runi. "I would suggest you return to your ship, for your attitude is not wanted here."

"I am not leaving," Runi said defiantly. "Not until you return to me,

where you belong."

"I _belong_ by Zeno's side, not yours. I never belonged to you."

"So you deny all the times we had?"

"All you have given me, Runi, is pain and humiliation. That is why I left."

"And do you know _why_ I put you through that?"

"To control everything I did," Sani growled.

"To keep you safe!"

"Safe! _safe_! Beating me so badly that I was in the infirm for two days is keeping me _safe_?"

"You know there are people out there that would use you and throw you away afterward. You remember what happened to me: I was trying to keep you from suffering the same fate at the hands of those monsters!"

"And in the process became a monster yourself. No, Runi, I will not go back, I will never go back. I will stay with Zeno."

"And what has he done that I have not?"

At this Sani laughed. "Zeno has treated me with kindness and understanding. He took me in and helped me when no one else could, or would. He gave me the opportunity to find myself again, to be happy again and for that I am not only forever grateful, but I love him."

Runi's eyes widened as he looked between them. "You are in bed with this man?" he asked

"I am," Sani confirmed without hesitation. "And I am happy with him." After a pause he added. "Leave, Runi. I do not want you. I never did."

Sani watched as Runi's eyes flicked through a number of emotions, from shock, to betrayal, to finally anger. Knowing what was about to happen, Sani felt his muscles tense, one foot starting to slide back into the start of a fighting stance. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Zeno take a few steps back to give him room. Around them he was faintly aware that the few guests that were still in the hanger bay had paused to watch the scene. Sani didn't care if they watched or not: if anything, this happening in public was more likely to help him than Runi. _I am ready for you, Runi,_ Sani thought. _Come at me._

He didn't have to wait long.

"Why you ungrateful, betraying little _slut_!" Runi roared as he charged the short distance between them, one fist raised high to strike. "If you will not come back willingly I will take you back by force!"

Sani immediately dropped into a full fighting stance as Runi's fist

bared down at him. He caught Runi's fist in mid-punch and twisted as he was taught, sending the rest of Runi's body twisting in the air before finally landing flat on his back. The look of shock on Runi's face was priceless, as Sani released his hand and stepped away. "What the hell-how did you do that?" Runi stammered, clearly confused, as he struggled to his feet.

"You cannot control me," Sani replied confidently. "You do not own me and I do not fear you anymore."

Runi gaped at him for a moment, before anger overtook him and he again charged at him, only to be given the same treatment. "How can this be!" Runi growled as he got to his feet once more. "I am bigger and stronger than you!"

"Size and strength do not always determine the battle," Zeno told him from the sidelines.

"We will see about that!"

Runi attacked again, only this time Sani did not use a throw on him. This time, he simply dodged and deflected his blows as he was taught, countering once with a quick precise blow to the gut. Runi staggered back a few paces, holding his belly, before recollecting himself and coming at him again.

It continued like this for several minutes, Sani rolling with the few blows Runi managed to connect with to minimize injury. In fact, Sani was starting to enjoy this. He was enjoying the power he had over Runi now and he couldn't help but start to comment about it. "How does it feel to not be in control, Runi?" he said as he landed a punch on Runi's face. "Does not feel good does it?"

Runi staggered backwards, dazed by the blow and Sani went on the offensive. He hit him several times in the gut, before following up with another blow to the head. This time Runi fell to the ground, not unconscious but clearly knocked out of his senses.

A part of him knew the fight was over and that the point had already been made, but Sani could not stop there. He walked over to Runi and stepped one leg over him so he was straddling him and glared down at him. Runi looked up at him, his eyes unfocused and appearing to not know where he was, but Sani did not care.

"I am going to make you feel every ounce of pain you gave me!" Sani growled and started wailing on him with his fists. This only continued for a moment before someone caught one of his fists. Looking up, he saw Zeno standing there with a calm and slightly disappointed expression on his face. He felt hurt and betrayed that Zeno would break his promise.

"Zeno, you promised you would not interfere!" Sani hissed.

"Yes," Zeno said calmly. "I said I would not interfere so long as things did not get out of hand. And things have gone out of hand."

"But..."

"Sani, think about what you are doing," Zeno said softly. "To

continue like this would be to sink to his level. "You do not want that do you?"

Sani stared at him, then looked down at Runi. Runi's face was already starting to swell up and turn colors from bruising and there was a slight trickle of blood seeping from a mandible that had a tooth knocked out. What got him the most though was Runi's expression: his eyes were begging, pleading for him to stop: how often had Sani given Runi that same expression, only for the pain to keep coming? How often did he beg for mercy but received none?

Shocked by this revelation, he stood up and staggered back, ashamed of himself. "Oh gods! oh spirits! what am I doing?" he whimpered, feeling Zeno immediately pull him into an embrace. "I do not want to become the same monster as he is!"

"It is alright, Sani," Zeno said softly.

"No it is not!" Sani protested as he buried his head in Zeno's chest plate. "I lost control!"

"Sani, you have been through more than many people go through, it is understandable that you would have a lot of pent of emotions. Not many can learn to control their emotions in battle, especially within four months!"

"Zeno! I!"

"What is important right now is that you accomplished what you set out to do," Zeno continued. "You confronted Runi and won. He has no control over your life anymore. You are truly free now."

Sani took a deep breath and sighed heavily. Zeno was right. He had won and that was the important thing. "Thank you, Zeno."

"And as for you!" Zeno glared at Runi, whom was only just getting to his feet again. "Leave," Zeno growled. "Before I call security and have them arrest you for trespassing."

Runi stared at Sani with a longing look before turning and headed back to the phantom he arrived on, muttering a faint 'this is not over' as he went. They both watched him intently until Runi disappeared up the grav lift and the phantom itself left the hanger bay. "It is over," Zeno said with a relieved sigh. "Let us go back home for a bit, hmm? We can do some 'things' to calm your nerves."

Sani smiled at the thought and allowed Zeno to start to lead him out of the hanger bay. Just before they reached the exit, he felt Zeno remove his arm from around his shoulders: they were, after all, on-duty, so PDA was not allowed. He thought he saw something odd by the door as well, but shook it off as trick of the light and the adrenaline still running through his blood.

Just after they had stepped through the door, something grabbed him by the back of his chest plate and yank him back into the hanger. Sani cried out in alarm and he heard Zeno call out to him just as the door slammed shut between them.

"We have a lot to discuss! my little runaway!", a cold voice said,

accompanied by the sound of an energy sword igniting. Sani's blood froze: he knew that voiceâ€|

It was Second Master Ruro Comewâ€|.

* * *

><p>"What the hell!" Zeno growled as he tried to get the door open, only it seemed to be locked. "Sesai!"<p>

Sesai's draconic form appeared on a nearby console. "I am trying, Ambassador, but the door appears to be malfunctioning," she said.

"Are the other doors into this hanger bay still functional?"

"Yes, Ambassador."

"Good, I am heading for the nearest one. Get security in there as well."

"Acknowledged, Ambassador."

As Sesai disappeared, Zeno ran full tilt toward the other door. It would only take about a minute at full sprint for him to reach it, but he knew a lot can happen in that timeframe. _If Sani is harmed, heads will roll_, he growled.

* * *

><p>Meanwhileâ€|

Sani watched helplessly as Second Master Ruro pulled his energy sword out of the wall. He knew the zealot had just severed the mechanism that opened the door, which would delay Zeno coming back in here. Which meant Ruro had plenty of time to do whatever he wanted to him.

He scanned the hanger bay with hopeful eyes, looking for someone, anyone that may still be in here that may be able to help him. However he only saw maintenance crew left in the bay, civilians that would not have the skill to take on any Sangheili, let alone a zealot armed with an energy sword. Worse, Ruro obviously knew this.

"Let me go!" Sani protested as Ruro started to half drag him toward one of the phantoms. "You no longer have any authority over me!"

"That is what you think," Ruro hissed. "As far as I am concerned those 'transfer' documents were forged, which means you still belong on my ship."

"Rtas' ship you mean," Sani growled, fighting the best he could against Ruro's grip around his neck, which was like iron. "And he personally authorized the transfer!"

"Rtas?" Ruro chuckled darkly. "That soft fool has been gone for so long he may as well never return. You forget, Sani, when he is not there, _I_ am in charge!"

The grav lift of the phantom was getting closer and Sani knew that the moment he took him up into the phantom it would be that much harder to escape. He was running out of time. Where was Zeno? Did Ruro somehow sabotage the other doors too? Then, on the far side of the hanger, a door opened and Sani saw the white armored form of Zeno charging toward them. Ruro saw him as well and he twisted around so that Sani was between him and Zeno.

"Back off, _Ambassador_," Ruro spat, his sword dangerously close to Sani's face. "He belongs to me!"

Zeno stopped about ten feet away from them, his gaze ice cold. "That is incorrect, Second Master," Zeno growled. "Sani's transfer paper work is official and I can prove every one of the signatures upon it was signed by the actual person. Now, let Sani go."

"Like I am going to believe someone like you," Ruro hissed. "And what are you going to do about anyway? I see no weapons on your person and I doubt you would want to risk hurting your precious Sani anyway." Out of the corner of his eye, Sani saw Ruro grin. "Looks like I hold all the cards, as they say—so I suggest you back off before someone gets hurt."

It was brief, but for a second Zeno seemed to look past them before focusing on Ruro again. "You are in trouble as is, Ruro," Zeno said, sounding a lot calmer now. "Do you really want to add kidnapping to your list of offenses?"

Ruro laughed. "Do you think the High Council cares what I do to this punk? You know as well I do that they are sick of your antics. I have nothing to worry about from them."

"It is not the High Council you need to worry about," a new voice said, behind him.

Startled, whirled around, his sword leading. Another sword appeared out of thin air and with a skillful parry, knocked the sword right out of Ruro's hand. Sani felt Ruro's grip loosen during this and he took the chance to wrest himself free. He immediately ran for Zeno, whom had a smirk on his face, and stood beside him. Only then did Sani's mind process that he knew the owner of the new voice and as he turned back around just in time to see the owner of the voice decloak.

Shipmaster Rtas 'Vadum.

16. Final Bonding

****Authors Note: **_Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.**

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><p>Chapter 15: Final Bonding

"Shi-Shipmasterâ€¦." Ruro said, backing away a few paces. "Why are you here? I thoughtâ€¦."

"I know what you thought, Ruro," Rtas interrupted. "And I am not done with military service yet. As to why I am here: I am here to take _my_ ship back from an inadequate second-in-command."

"Inadequate!" Ruro cried. "I ran the ship better than you ever did!"

"You ran it like it was a prison," Rtas snapped. "After Zeno told me what happened with Sani, I did a bit of investigating of my own. I found out all I needed to know from the crew to know you let the power of your station go to your head. With the approval of the Imperial Admiral, I decided to take action to knock you down a few pegs."

Ruro's eyes widened in shock. "You meanâ€¦!"

"Not only am I relieving you of command of the _Shadow of Intent_, but you are officially stripped of the rank of zealot and are now only a minor. Perhaps spending some time as a minor once more will teach you to be a bit less arrogant and power hungryâ€¦."

"No!" Enraged, Ruro leapt at Rtas. Rtas easily lifted his foot and kicked him right in the face with his armored boot and Ruro fell to the floor, unconscious.

"Arrogant fool," Rtas growled, turning off his sword.

Just then Zeno heard the sound of the security team running up to them. "You are late," Zeno said to them, turning his head to look at them. "What were you doing? Eating donuts and playing cards?" One of the team tried to subtly brush the crumbs off his uniform, only to fail miserably. Zeno shook his head in disbelief. "Well, may as well make yourselves useful," he pointed at the unconscious Ruro and said. "Take him to the brig and strip him of his armor while you are at it."

"I will be sending my own team over to 'retrieve' him soon," Rtas said as the security team got to work.

After Ruro was carried away, Zeno regarded Rtas fully. "Good to see you again, Commander," he said. "Though I must askâ€¦when did you arrive here? It is obvious you did not arrive on the _Shadow of Intent_, otherwise I suspect Ruro would have known of your presence."

"I arrived here three days ago, by supply ship," Rtas explained. "It was aâ€¦challengeâ€¦to keep my arrival a secret. Fortunately for me, your AI knows how to keep a secret."

"Really? Now I have to wonder what else she is keeping from me." Zeno glanced at a nearby console.

"Nothing you need to know about, Ambassador." Sesai's voice came from it.

"Bah! Yeah right," Zeno grumbled, both Sani and Rtas chuckling.

"Now I must ask," Rtas said. "How did you know it was me before I acted?"

"I didn't," Zeno confessed. "But considering how pissed you were at Ruro's actions, you were the most likely to want to come down to see if Ruro would try anything when he arrived here."

"And you were correct in that assessment." Rtas' gaze then turned to Sani. "Sani, it is good to see you have improved greatly since I have last seen you."

"Thank you, Shipmaster," Sani said, bowing his head. "I could not have come this far without Zeno's help."

"Yes, and Ella thinks you two make a cute couple."

Zeno couldn't help but blush a little: he noticed Sani was as well. "Speaking of which, how is she doing and how is Enko?"

"Ella finally has all her energy back, which is why I was able to come to 'deal' with this problem," Rtas replied. "As for Enko he is growing fast too fast for my liking. Hard to believe that in a few more months he will be going to the common rooms."

"Kids do grow up fast," Zeno said with smile. "Sounds like he is going to be a big boy when he grows up."

"Yes, he may give you a run for your money. Anyway, I need to go to my ship: from the sound of things, I have a lot of work to do to undo the damage Ruro caused."

"And Runi?" Sani asked.

"I will do my best to keep him confined to the ship," Rtas said. "I will not be able to keep an eye on him all the time however."

"I will have security keep an eye out for him should he manage to sneak back to the Cairo," Zeno said.

"I know I can win against him now," Sani said. "So even if he did manage to come at me again I should be fine."

"Just do not get over-confident, Sani," Rtas warned. "If he gets desperate enough, he may pull something you are not prepared for."

"Understood, Shipmaster."

* * *

><p>Rtas was true to his word: a Sangheili team arrived from the Shadow of Intent to pick up Ruro. Ruro, whom was by now awake, bitched and complained the whole time he was being escorted off the Cairo. Besides that though, the rest of the day was rather quiet. Zeno and Sani both appreciated that fact.

"What a long day," Zeno said with a sigh as they returned home. "Productive, but long."

"Yes," Sani agreed as they both started to strip off their armor.

"_Very_ productive. In fact, I think, due to the success of this day, we should celebrate."

"Hmmm?" Zeno smiled at him. "Yes that is a good idea, though what did you have inâ€¦" He was interrupted when Sani suddenly pressed up against him, a soft purr in his throat as his hands roamed rather low on his body. "Ooohâ€¦I see." Zeno chuckled softly. "Let us wash up first, sweet, then we can have some fun."

"But what if I do not want to wait that long?" Sani's eyes were full of mischief.

"Have patience, my love," Zeno cooed, stroking his face. "It will be worth it, I promise you."

"Aww, alright."

Zeno finished stripping off his armor and bodysuit and stepped into the shower. He adjusted the temperature and turned on the water: he stood there for a moment savoring the warmth. _But this pales in comparison to how Sani feels,_ he thought with a smile, his mind already turning to dirty thoughts. _Calm down now, you do not want to start without him now would you?_ Zeno chuckled to himself as he reached for the soap.

Just as he grabbed it though, he became aware of another presence in the shower stall. Turning around, he saw Sani had stepped in with him, stripped bare. "Saniâ€¦what are youâ€¦" His question died on his mandibles as Sani kissed him.

"I decided I could not wait," Sani said coyly. "Besidesâ€¦I always wanted to shower with youâ€¦".

"But you know my thing with wet skinâ€¦".

"Ah, but that is what I _want_." Zeno felt Sani trace a finger down his chest, over his belly and around his already emerging shaft. "I wantâ€¦to bond with you fully, Zeno."

"You meanâ€¦".

"Yesâ€¦I want to mate with you."

Zeno's hearts leapt up onto his throat. At long last, Sani was ready for the ultimate step, something Zeno had been eagerly waiting for. "Well thenâ€¦I would be happy to obligeâ€¦once we wash up: I do not like doing the deed while filthy from a day's work."

"Let me wash you then and you can do the same with me."

Zeno saw no problem with that. Only problem was, midway through they started doing more foreplay then actual washing. At one point, Zeno got so excited that he nearly took Sani in the shower, before he checked himself.

"Why did you stop?" Sani asked, clearly disappointed.

"Iâ€¦," Zeno panted as he tried to calm himself down a bit. "I want to do this properly, for your first time. Your _real_ first time."

"Ooohâ€|," Sani said softly. "Butâ€|what could be considered _proper_?"

"You will see," Zeno said with a smile.

They finished washing up and, without bothering to dry off, moved on to the bed room. There, they engaged in more foreplay before Zeno finally stopped long enough to grab an essential item. "What is that?" Sani asked, eyeing the small jar in Zeno's hand.

"Lubricant," Zeno replied as he applied some to his shaft. "It will help things go more smoothly and, hopefully, less painfully."

"I seeâ€|is thereâ€|anything I should do?" There was a hint of nervousness in Sani's voice.

Zeno smiled as he said. "Just lay down on the bed, sweet, but on your back."

"My back?" Sani said as he complied. "But isn'tâ€|the other wayâ€|."

"This way is more intimate, in my opinion," Zeno explained as he knelt down in front of him. He coaxed Sani to lift his legs up and started applying the lubricant to his vent.

"Tha-that feels weirdâ€|but goodâ€|," Sani confessed as Zeno worked in the lubricant.

"It will get even better, I promise you."

After applying a bit more lube, Zeno stood up and leaned over Sani, planting his hands on either side of the paler Sangheili. He stayed like this for several minutes, gently kissing Sani while his shaft occasionally rubbed against Sani's. Finally, unable to wait himself anymore, he repositioned himself for entryâ€|.

* * *

><p>Sani gasped faintly as Zeno slipped in. This felt similar to the times when Runi forced himself upon him to 'punish' him, but different. Gloriously different. There was little to no pain and no humiliation; only passion and pleasure. He could also see several reasons why Zeno chose this position for this as well.<p>

For one, there was much more he could do during this than just laying there taking it: he could actively participate! He could kiss Zeno, or stroke his back and even, in a limited fashion, do some thrusting of his own. The best part though, was that all he had to do was to open his eyes whenever he had doubts that it was Zeno doing this to him.

It was wonderful.

All good things had to come to an end though, but what a glorious end it was. They released almost at the same time and they held each other close, supporting each other as the ecstasy came to an end. Panting, they curled up together and cuddled for a while, catching their breaths.

Zeno broke away from this embrace only long enough to order dinner. While they waited for dinner to arrive, they continued to cuddle, stroking each other lightly. Not to arouse, but to simply enjoy each other in a non-sexual way. When dinner arrived, they didn't bother to even put on a robe, instead eating their meal in the buff. After dinner was finished and they allowed it time to digest, they started on round twoâ€¦|.

* * *

><p>The last few days had been bliss. Not only had there been no sign, or word, of Runi trying anything, but Sani's relationship with Zeno had risen to a whole new level. They had been having sex at least once a day and Zeno wasn't shy about experimenting with different positions either. So it only made sense to him that he should finally move in officially with Zeno. Within a day, he had transferred his belongings and cleaned out his old place, happy to leave that stage of his life behind.

"Hmm, odd," Sani muttered as he checked his messages. Ever since he and Zeno became a couple, he had been sending letters back to his keep, his sister Yura specifically, so he had made it a habit to check for responses first thing in the morning. He wasn't, however, expecting this message.

"What is it, love?" Zeno said, looking up from dressing, a hint of concern on his face.

"I got a message from Quartermaster Brown that there is an issue with my old apartment he needs to talk to me about, first thing in the morning at the apartment in fact," Sani replied as he got dressed. "I would have sworn I had done everything needed to be cleared."

"Quartermasters can be very picky about what is considered 'done'," Zeno told him. "Best go talk to him and find out what is up. Just let me know if you need me to lean on him a bit." There was slight mischievous smirk on his face.

Sani laughed and nuzzled his mate. "Now, now, my love. You cannot fix all my problems: I need to take care of some things on my own."

"Mmm, true, but my offer still stands."

"I will let you know how it went regardless, love."

"I would go with you, but I have one of those long boring meetings this morning," Zeno muttered. "You lucky bastard, you get to miss it because of this."

"I am sure I will be fine," Sani said with a laugh. "I best get going, I will see you later." He gave Zeno a quick kiss before heading out the door.

His old apartment was on the other side of the station, so it took a good ten minutes to walk there. On the way there though, something kept nagging at him, like there was something he should be remembering. Plus, he kept getting the feeling he was being followed,

though every time he looked back he saw nothing. That feeling was even stronger by the time he reached his apartment, though he still didn't see anyone.

The door was unlocked, but as he stepped in, turning on the lights as he did so, he remembered what he had forgotten. The Quartermaster had specifically told him that if he needed to talk to him about anything he would call him to his _office_. Immediately his mind started to scream _danger_! So he turned around to head back out again, only to see the door shut and lock right in front of him.

Unlocking the door would have been easy enough, but something was in the way, something he could not see. As his eyes adjusted to the different light level, he started to see a faint shimmering shape and he caught a whiff of a familiar scent.

"No," Sani uttered, his eyes wide as he started to take a step back, to put distance between them. "How did you?" His question went unfinished, for the next thing he felt was pain on the side of this head.

Then darkness.

* * *

><p>Zeno tried to stifle a yawn, but was not completely successful, earning some glares from a few other attendees. He couldn't help it: the current speaker had one of those annoying, monotone like voices that just puts him to sleep. Besides, a quick glance around the room told him there were at least two others starting to nod off here, so why was he the only one getting the disapproving glares?

Ugh, Zeno thought as he shifted positions in the attempt to stay awake. _This is going to be a very long meeting indeed. I hope Sani is having better luck than me!._

* * *

><p>There was a dull throb in his head as he returned to consciousness. At first he wasn't sure where he was, or what happened, but as his mind started to sort things out, he recognized that he was in a very bad situation. He was on his belly on the naked mattress of what was once his bed, his hands handcuffed to the metal headrest. Sani felt the cool air of the apartment's AC unit directly on his back, which meant he had been stripped completely naked.<p>

"Ah, you are awake," a voice said. "I was starting to wonder if I hit you too hard."

Sani turned his head to see Runi just finish stripping himself. A quick glance on the floor revealed a stealth harness, complete with an air tight helmet. This explained everything: how Runi slipped out of the _Shadow of Intent_, sent the false message and trap him like this. "And you cared about how hard you hit me before?" Sani growled as he tested the restraints. "Let me go!"

"I think not," Runi said as he approached. "There are things I need to do with you, Sani. Things to correct."

"Zeno knows where I went!" Sani snapped. "He will come here looking for me!"

Pain erupted on his face as Runi slapped him. "First off, no mentioning that man's horrid name," Runi hissed. "Ughâ€¦it disgusts me that I can smell him all over you."

"Tough, Zeno and I are one and when he finds out about this he'llâ€¦". Another slap, harder this time, stuck him.

"Tsk, you are being more stubborn than before. That man really has changed you for the worse. Speaking of which, how can you be sure he will find you before I break you?"

Runi had a point there: Zeno would be stuck in that meeting for hours and Sani was certain he had been gone not even an hour yet. _Unlessâ€¦_, Sani thought has he scanned the room for the apartment's control console, which he knew he could use to contact Sesai. However, the console was dark, meaning it had no power running to it, which meant Sesai did not have access to it: Runi must have turned it off, or otherwise sabotaged it.

"You are mine and mine only," Runi told him as he climbed into the bed. "And you will realize that quickly, for your sake."

"I will never submit to you," Sani growled, realizing he was on his own: the chances of someone hearing him scream at this time of day were quite low. "Never! My heart is for Zeno and Zeno only!"

Two blows to the face this time, one with a closed fist: that one nearly caused him to black out. "You have much to learnâ€¦," Runi growled, Sani feeling his claws dug painfully into his shoulders. "But by the time I am done with you, you _will_ call me your one and only!"

Sani wished he had blacked out with the last blow now. Anything to spare him, albeit temporarily, from the pain that was going to come nextâ€¦.

17. Rescue

_**Authors Note: **_Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 16: Rescue

Finally the meeting was over and Zeno was grateful more than ever to be leaving. For most of the meeting he had this nagging feeling in the back of his mind, a feeling that something was wrong. He realized what it was when he stepped out of the conference room: he hadn't heard a word from Sani since he left this morning.

It wasn't like him: Sani usually kept him updated on what was going on when they weren't together. He got a bad feeling about this. "Sesai," he called out. "Has there been any sign of Sani lately?"

"Aide Sani was last seen walking into his former residence at approximately 0805, Ambassador," Sesai replied. "He has not been observed walking out again."

Must be a really long discussion, he thought, he _hoped_. However, his instincts were telling him this could not be the case. This was especially so when he spotted Quartermaster Brown himself passing by.

"Quartermaster!" Zeno called out. "Have you seen Sani?"

"Good day, Ambassador," the Quartermaster said. "No, I have not. Is there a problem?"

Zeno's hearts started to sink. "Did you send Sani a message about needing to see him at his old apartment today?"

"Heavens no, there was no need. That boy left the place in better condition than most of my tenants."

Zeno was starting to panic now. "The message was traced back to your office—was there any sign of tampering on your equipment?"

"No—though there was an Elite that came in late last night that was asking about Sani. Big one, about your height, Ambassador, and wearing stealth armor." There was a brief pause as the man's eyes went wide. "Gods! It had to have been him! I had leave him alone in the office for a few minutes to receive a shipment—and he left almost immediately after I returned. But why would he—"

"It was Runi—," Zeno said, a mix of anger and fear in his voice. "Has to be—have you changed the code on the door to that apartment yet?"

"Not yet, though I was planning to do that today."

"Come with me," Zeno said grabbing the man's wrist before taking off in a full sprint. "I may need you to unlock the door."

"Whoa...whoa—_whoa_ Ambassador! I can't run as fast as you!"

"Then give me the damn code!" Zeno growled. "The more time we waste—"

"Alright, alright!" The man rattled off the code which Zeno quickly committed to memory.

"Sesai! Scramble the security and medical teams and send them to Sani's old apartment!" he cried as released the quartermaster and took off at full speed. If he was right, Runi has had _hours_ to do whatever he wanted to Sani. Zeno prayed Sani still lived—

* * *

><p>Meanwhileâ€|

Sani groaned as he regained consciousness once more. A part of him held the vain hope that what he had been through was nothing more than a bad dream, but as his senses fed him information, he realized his hope was vain indeed. He was still handcuffed to the bed nude, though now his whole body ached from the beating and he could smell blood from a few wounds Runi had opened up on his hide.

How long was I out this time? he wondered. Apparently long enough for Runi to redress himself and leave, for he saw no sign of him or his armor. _But he could be cloakedâ€|waiting for me to wake up againâ€|, _he thought with a shiver.

He had been knocked out this time due to frustration on Runi's part he suspected. All because he refused to give in to Runi's demands, refused to allow him to condition him to love only him. It had been hard thoughâ€|so hard. Sani had to keep telling himself why he had to keep resisting, reminding himself that he had someone that really cared about him, whom may be looking for him by now. Someone that will kick Runi's ass from one end of the station to the other once he found out about this.

But will he still want me? he thought, doubt creeping into his mind. _I did fall for thisâ€|after all._ _No! Only way Zeno may reject me is if I give in completely._

Sani had no idea though how long he had been enduring this torture: Zeno may still be stuck in that meeting for all he knew. Runi obviously wasn't here, otherwise he likely would have pounced on him again by now: still he could come back at any moment. Come back, to start the process all over again. _No, I mustâ€|I must find a way to escape,_ he decided. He studied the chains of the cuffs, trying to determine what type of metal they were made from and if there was any weak links. A couple of the links on the one on his right hand did look poorly welded, so maybe he can pull himself free. So he maneuvered his hand so he could grip the cuff around that wrist and started to pull.

He did not have much leverage working for him here, however, having to rely more on brute strength. He thought he saw one of the links start to give, but he didn't have enough force to break it completely. Thinking a moment, he remembered that his legs were not tied down, though it hurt so much to move them due to how badly Runi ravaged his ass. With a lot of effort he was able to bring them forward and brace his feet against the headboard. Even with the strength in his legs, it took all his strength to break the chain. Blood now seeped from under the part of the cuff that was still clamped around his wrist, where the metal had bit into his hide during the effort, but he didn't care: he was one step closer to freedom.

Sani paused for a moment to catch his breath, but not for too long. He started pulling on the other chain. But even with both arms and legs, this one would not give. Getting desperate, he started looking around for anything he could use to weaken it, for the headboard itself he could tell was too strong for him to break in his current state. Then he spotted something on the dresser next to the bed: a plasma pistol. It had to be Runi's and Sani shuddered at the thought

of what Runi intended to do to him with that. He had to stretch a bit to reach it, but after a moment he just barely managed to grab it. Good, there was plenty of charge in it, so he turned it on the remaining chain and fired.

The metal chain was no match for the hot plasma, the plasma severing the chain with only a couple of shots. He was free of his bonds, now he had to get out of this place. Sani got off the bed and onto his feet, finding his legs a bit shaky.

A sound at the door made him stop in his tracks, fear and dread filling his hearts. Runi—it had to be Runi coming back. But wait—He still had the plasma pistol. _No—no not again, never again—._ Sani thought as he pointed the weapon at the door. _I will kill you before you hurt me again!_

When the door opened, he fired—.

* * *

><p>Nearly there, hold on Sani! Zeno thought, ignoring the burning feeling in his lungs as he ran. _Please hang on!_

_Ambassador, my sensors detected sounds of weapons fire in the vicinity of Sani's apartment,- _ Sesai informed him via his ear piece.

No, no, no! Zeno thought, thinking the worse. "Where is that security team!"

It will take several minutes more before they arrive, Ambassador,- Sesai said regretfully. _—“The same applies to the medical team.—_

"Dammit! Those lazy asses need to work on their response times!"

Shall I file an official complaint to the appropriate offices on your behalf, Ambassador?-

"No, I will do that myself when this is over," Zeno snarled as he skidded around a corner. A few seconds later he was at the right apartment door and he hastily typed in the access code, only for it to not work. _Come on—come on!_ he thought, praying he just fat fingered it and not that Runi somehow changed the code. After the third attempt the door finally opened. Before he could rush in though, he saw the familiar glow of a plasma pistol aimed right at him. _Shit!_ Zeno dived to one side as the weapon fired, grazing his upper right arm.

"You're not going to hurt me anymore! You hear me!" Sani's voice screamed from within the apartment.

Zeno immediately felt relief that Sani was alive, but that relief was short lived when he realized Sani must have been pushed to his breaking point to react like this. "Sani! It is me, Zeno!" Zeno called back, hoping his voice would be enough to snap Sani out of it.

There was silence and Zeno risked peeking inside, but he did not like what he saw. Sani was standing in the middle of the room, shaking badly. He was covered in bruises and had a number of open wounds and around his wrists were the remains of handcuffs. Sani was still aiming the plasma pistol toward the door, but it looked like all the will to fire it had drained from him.

"Saniâ€¦," Zeno cautiously stepped into the room, his hands up. "It is alrightâ€¦it is meâ€¦."

"Z-Zen-Zenoâ€¦?" Sani said, the weapon finally falling out of his hands. "Oh godsâ€¦Oh gods I shot you!"

"It is OK," Zeno said, quickly closing the distance between them before wrapping his arms around him in an embrace. "I understandâ€¦It is not your faultâ€¦."

"But it is!" Sani protested as he sobbed into Zeno's chest. "I feel for it! Iâ€¦!"

Zeno silenced him with a kiss. "The only one to blame here is Runi," Zeno told him, anger starting to build up. "And he will pay for this, dearly. But first, let us get you to the infirm to check you over, the medical team should be here at anyâ€¦."

"He is not going anywhere," a new voice growled.

Zeno whipped around to see a stealth armored Sangheili in the threshold, the voice telling him it was Runi. "I do not believe you have clearance to use that kind of armor," Zeno growled lowly, piecing together how Runi managed to pull this off. "Let me guess: Ruro gave you the access codes to the armory before Rtas managed to change them all." He only got a dark chuckle in response, which was enough to confirm his suspicions. "I will not let you touch Sani againâ€¦."

"If I were you, ambassador, I would step aside so I can claim what is mine," Runi snarled.

"The only one Sani belongs to is himself," Zeno retorted.

"And you think you can protect him? You have done a poor job at protecting him so far." Runi nodded toward Sani, whom shrank away. "Let me take the burden of taking care of this worthless worm for you."

"I care for him more than you ever did," Zeno growled, his anger rising. "I will give my life to protect him if I must."

"You do not deserve him!" Runi snapped. "And if I have to kill you to take what is mine, then so be it!" Runi then added in coy tone. "And do not worry about Sani when you are dead, I will take good care of him. He will be a like a perfect little slaveâ€¦."

Zeno's mind darkened. He recalled everything Sani told him what Runi did to him and what he obviously recently just did to him. Behind him, he could feel Sani shaking in fear, both memory to what he had been through and what he would continue to go through should Runi get his hands on him again. This only served to darken his mind even more, his vision narrowing more and more until he only saw Runi in a

purple hazeâ€|.

* * *

><p>Though Zeno was right here beside him, Sani only felt fear, not confidence. From what he could see, Runi had the advantage: not only was the ambassador armor not designed for combat, but Runi had active camo, not to mention the possibility that armor having a wrist blade. If that was the case, there was a chance Zeno may lose this confrontation, possibility even his life and Runi could do anything he wanted.<p>

Rrrr-whump-clik

Everything seemed to stop at that sound. Sani had never personally heard such a sound before, but he knew what it was on an instinctual level: if you value your life, leave now. Runi knew it as well, for he had stopped in his approach, even took a step back as if intimidated, so it couldn't have been him to create the sound and Sani knew he didn't produce it. He looked up at the only other person in the room that could have made it and his hearts froze.

Zeno was on the brink of pure rage. His mandibles hung open, completely exposed, his head was low, and his back and shoulders arched. The most telling sign though was his eyes: the pupils were barely visible as they were nothing more than razor thin slits. There was even a bit of drool starting to trickle down one of his mandibles. He was a frightening sight to behold.

Runi looked hesitant, though it was hard to tell due to the air tight helmet he was wearing. Then, he seemed to get some resolve and started to approach again, his own posture aggressive. Sani heard a deep growl deep within Zeno's chest, followed by the low bass of a large amount of air being expelled at once, concluded by a sharp click from the lower mandibles clicking together. A second warning: Zeno was being very generous, for it is unusual for someone to get two warnings of this nature.

The second warning though seem to have even less effect on Runi, whom did a poor imitation of the warning himself before pressing forward. Sani watched as Zeno's eyes narrowed to slitsâ€|

â€|then Zeno exploded.

* * *

><p>AN: *passes around popcorn***

18. Rage

_**Authors Note: **_Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 17: Rage

One second Zeno was right in front of him; the next, Zeno had Runi on the floor, lunging at Runi's neck with his sharp fangs bared. It took Sani only a second to realize that if Runi hadn't been wearing the type of suit he had, Zeno would have already ripped his throat out. As it stood, the thicker bodysuit material was preventing Zeno's fangs from penetrating the softer flesh of Runi's throat, but Sani knew that if given enough time, the raging Zeno would eventually rip through it.

It took a few seconds, but Runi seemed to finally register what had just happened and started trying to kick and punch Zeno off. Finally, he was able to plant his feet on Zeno's midriff and push him off, sending Zeno tumbling. Sani scrambled out of the way as Zeno nearly landed on top of him, Zeno springing back to his feet almost immediately. However, even in that short of time, Runi had disappeared.

Did he flee? Sani wondered as both he and Zeno scanned the room. He got his answer quickly enough when something struck Zeno in the face. Zeno growled and swung, but missed his target. More blows came, though they seemed to barely affect Zeno in his raged induced stage: the only real effect was knocking his helmet off and pissing Zeno off even more.

"What's the matter Zeno?" Runi's voice taunted. "Can't hit what you can't see?"

He's toying with him, Sani thought with a frown, hearing Runi laughing as Zeno kept missing him. _The bastard is toying with him._ It would be only a matter of time before Runi got serious and while Zeno seemed to have trouble pinpointing a moving target in active camo in his enraged state, Sani did not. Sani felt the desire to remove Runi's advantage, but wasn't sure how.

Wait, the plasma pistol! he thought, scanning the floor for the weapon. Sani finally spotted it by the wall, where it must have been kicked over due to the fight. He quickly walked over and picked it up, looking it over to see if it was damaged. _Only enough battery for one overcharged shot,_ Sani thought with a frown. _Better make this count._

Looking up, it seemed Runi had stopped using Zeno as a punching bag. This was a problem, as without Runi moving around quickly, it was harder to spot him. Zeno himself was just standing there, nothing moving save for the occasional flick of his eyes. Then, with a snarl, Zeno backed up toward the wall, angling himself so that a piece of furniture and the wall covered his back and flank. It was tactical move Sani wasn't expecting from someone in an enraged state: Runi wasn't expecting it either.

"Aww am I intimidating you?" Runi's voice mocked, clearly misinterpreting Zeno's actions. At least Sani had a general location on where Runi was now and he aimed the plasma pistol there, waiting. He was aware that if Runi saw him, it would become that much harder to do this: Runi might even force Zeno into the line of fire at the last second. It was a chance he had to take though.

There was silence for several tense seconds and Runi was not moving

as far as Sani could tell. Then Sani heard the faint _tssh_ of an energy blade activating and his hearts went cold. So it turned out that suit _did_ have an energy dagger, meaning making this shot was even more important. Adjusting his aim to where he heard the sound, Sani took a deep breath to steady himself and held down the trigger, starting the charging process. Zeno, meanwhile, still hadn't moved beyond the narrowing of his eyes and his fists clenching.

"Time to die!" Runi cried suddenly. Sani readjusted his aim quickly and let the shot fly. He didn't have a chance to charge it as long as he wanted, but he was out of time. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. Sani could see Runi now due to his sudden movement and the bright, neon-green ball of plasma streaking toward him.

At first it seemed the shot was going to miss, but it just caught him on the back. The EMP effect knocked out Runi's active camo, forcing him into full visibility. It also stunned him, having not expected interference like this. It bought Zeno plenty of time to act and act he did.

With a roar, Zeno took a step forward and threw an uppercut. The blow hit Runi squarely under the 'chin' of the helmet, snapping his head back and breaking the seal on his helmet. Runi staggered back a few paces, shaking his head, the helmet slipping off and landing with a thud on the floor. Without the helmet, Runi could no longer use active camo. He knew this and he reached down for the helmet.

Zeno wasn't about to allow that however. He rushed forward and grabbed Runi, one hand on the crotch and the other seizing the chest plate, and threw him. Due to Runi's size, the distance wasn't great, but Zeno did manage to bounce him off a dresser and out the window, shards of glass flying everywhere. With unprecedented agility, Zeno leaped out the window himself.

Sani rushed out the door, the plasma pistol left behind as it was no longer useful, to see a bit of a face-off. Zeno was crouched in a decorative planter that was in the middle of the corridor, while Runi was still by the shattered remains of the window, looking less sure of himself. Runi still had the energy dagger activated, which he brought to bear when Zeno charged him.

Zeno ducked under the swing and grabbed hold of Runi again. This time he flipped him over and slammed him into a nearby bench, the metal frame bending and wood snapping. He made a lunge at Runi's neck again, but Runi was able to fend him off with the energy dagger, managing to score a small cut on Zeno's upper right mandible. In response, Zeno tossed him over the planter.

At this point, Zeno briefly focused his attention on the ruined bench. With a strong pull, he yanked out a steel rod that was once part of the frame and stalked toward Runi with it in hand. Runi, by now had risen to his feet once more and was glancing between the rod in Zeno's hand and his energy dagger. When Zeno started swinging his improvised weapon, he attempted to parry, or perhaps even sever the rod. However, Runi was not adept at using a dagger, so most of Zeno's attacks got through. Most of the blows seemed to hit Runi's armor, but the few blows that did hit something more vulnerable must have hurt a lot from the cries of pain from Runi: Sani thought he heard a few bones crack.

It was at this point, Runi finally seemed to get it in his head that he was outmatched here and started to run. Zeno was having none of that though and gave chase, catching up to him in a single burst of speed and knocking him to the ground. He then raised the steel rod and struck Runi in the back of the leg, Runi crying out in pain. Zeno raised the rod and then attempted to stab Runi through the back, but Runi was able to roll out of the way in time, the impact sending up a brief shower of sparks.

There were several more attempts at stabbing him before Runi finally managed to knock the rod out of Zeno's hands, sending it skittering away. Sani followed its path, noting it nearly hit one of the security detail that Zeno must have called in before the fight started. When they arrived he did not know, but it was evident that they were unsure at how to deal with this current situation. Behind them, Sani believed he saw a medical team, though who they were intended for could go either way by this point.

"What, by the Gods, is going on here?" a new voice boomed. Sani recognized the voice immediately.

"Shipmaster," Sani said as he approached Rtas. Rtas looked at him and his eyes widened: Sani blushing when he realized he was still nude. Regardless, Rtas looked at him, then at the two combatants and nodded, seemingly understanding completely at what happened.

By now, Zeno had Runi pinned on the ground, one hand pinning the arm that had the activated energy dagger, while the other hand was on Runi's throat. Runi was trying his hardest to keep Zeno from biting his face off, his eyes wide in outright fear and a few cuts where Zeno's fangs did get him here and there. It also looked like Runi had a broken lower mandible now, from how it hung loosely from his jaw.

"This needs to be stopped." Sani heard Rtas mutter, a tone of regret in his voice. He watched the shipmaster as he took a couple of steps forward, pulling out a plasma rifle.

"Shipmaster!" Sani cried in alarm.

"As much as Runi likely deserves this," Rtas explained. "I cannot allow Zeno to kill him, for his sake as Ambassador. If he does not heed me." The shipmaster left the statement unfinished, the meaning clear. If Zeno did not snap out of it and regain control of himself, Rtas would be forced to shoot him. "Zeno 'Ribal!" Rtas called out. "Cease and desist at once!"

Zeno, whom now had both of Runi's arms pinned and his mandibles firmly around Runi's throat, glanced up at Rtas. Fortunately, the thick bodysuit Runi was wearing was still holding. Unfortunately, Zeno did not seem to even recognize Rtas as a superior: he appeared to be regarding Rtas as a competitor for his 'prey', if his loud growl was any indication. "Zeno," Rtas said more softly as he stepped closer, aiming his weapon at Zeno. "Snap out of it. Do _not_ make me shoot you please."

That didn't seem to work either. In fact, Rtas coming closer seemed to just agitate Zeno even more. Zeno's growls got louder and Sani could see the muscles in his legs start to tense.

Oh gods, he's going to attack the shipmaster! Sani thought, realize he had to do something before things got even worse. There was no time to think things through: he just acted. He ran at Zeno and slammed into him, knocking him off Runi, whom he tripped over. They tumbled together in a mass of limbs, before coming to rest by a wall.

The moment he was able, Sani wrapped his arms around Zeno, pinning his arms to his side. For a brief, terrifying moment, it looked like Zeno was going to bite him, those sharp fangs heading right for his neck, only for him to stop at the last moment. _My scent,_ Sani realized. _He recognizes my scent, even now._ "Zeno," he said softly in his ear hole, hoping Zeno recognized his voice as well. "Come back to usâ€|you have done enough. Please come back to usâ€|come back to me_."

Sani was aware of Rtas standing close by, but ignored him at the moment. He focused solely on Zeno, listening as his hearts slowed down and the growling stopped, felt how Zeno's breathing returned to normal, and watched as his mandibles returned to a non-threatening position. "Sa-Sani?" Zeno's unmistakable voice said after a few moments more, his voice low and uncertain.

Only now did Sani release him and pull away, only to wrapping his arms around him again, this time in an embrace. "Zenoâ€|welcome backâ€|," Sani said, sighing with relief. Around him, he heard other sighs of relief, Rtas' being the heaviest."

"What the hell just happened?" Zeno asked as they got to their feet. "Last thing I remember clearly was finding you in the roomâ€|after that, things are rather fuzzyâ€|."

"Un-_hand_ me!" They heard Runi growl as a couple of soldiers forced him to his feet and try to cuff him. "I am the victim here!"

"Victim?" Rtas growled, rounding on him. "I seem to remember explicitly forbidding you from leaving the ship. Not to mention at suit of stealth ranked armor you stole. And that is just a start from the looks of things."

"Whatever, I proved a point." Runi grinned coyly at Sani. "You _do_ have feelings for me! Why else would youâ€|." His statement was cut short when Sani clocked him one, knocking him out cold.

"I did it to save Zeno's ass, not yours," Sani muttered, shaking his hand.

"Have his injuries treated than take him to the brig," Rtas growled at the security team. "I will see to him later. Zenoâ€|." Rtas' tone was now of regret. In response, Sani felt Zeno wrap his arms around him in a protective embrace. He could not see his expression fully, but Sani thought he saw a pleading look in Zeno's eyes. This seemed to change whatever Rtas was about to say. "I would suggest getting Sani to the infirm and have him checked over, yourself as well. We will talk later."

"Yes, commander," Zeno responded softly.

Sani could not miss the sorrow in Zeno's voice.

* * *

><p>The journey to the infirm was quiet, both Sani and Zeno having a lot on their minds and neither were willing to voice those thoughts. In Zeno's case, he was still piecing together what exactly happened and what he was starting to recall bothered him. I was acting worse than a Brute, he realized. Zeno also realized that the High Council would no doubt use this against him. _Later,_ he told himself. _Worry about that later. Focus on Sani right now._

Sani seemed to be a conflicting mix of emotions during the whole situation. He flipped between a shamed, frightened man to a confident warrior and back again during the encounter. Now though, it seemed the shamed, frightened version was starting to win over completely. Sani was pressed against him, shivering occasionally, as they walked, while Zeno had one supportive arm around his shoulders. It was all he could do at this time, for Sani refused a gurney, or Zeno to carry him: at least he allowed Zeno to find him something to wrap himself in, to protect what dignity he had left.

How much progress has been undone? Zeno wondered as they arrived at the infirmary. Other questions similar to that raced through Zeno's mind, such as how intimate would Sani be willing be after this? Would he ever want to have sex again? One thing was for certain, Sani would be needing a lot of support for the time being, support Zeno hoped he would be able to give him.

Initial signs didn't look good at all, in fact. When the medics started to do a rape kit, Sani freaked at the touch of the sample swab. Zeno had to hold him, telling him reassuring words and rubbing his back while they examined his posterior: he _really_ did not like the probe. Fortunately, that was the only sticky point: the rest, such a taking photos of injuries and removing the handcuff remains, Sani took like a champ.

Only after all the physical evidence was collected did they allow him to take a shower. While Sani was doing that, Zeno allowed himself to be assessed for his own injuries: the only thing he needed was a bit of bio-glue for the cut on his mandible. When Sani was done, the medics started actually treating his injuries. All his injuries were relatively minor, but the medics wanted to keep him overnight for observation.

After being shown his hospital room, Sani went straight to bed, exhaustion overtaking him. Zeno knew he really out to eat something first, they both should, but he didn't blame Sani for not being hungry after all this. In truth, Zeno wasn't hungry either for similar reasons, so Zeno just settled down in the visitor chair by Sani's bed, holding his hand as Sani tried to fall asleep: it understandably took a little longer than normal for him to do so.

Zeno, unfortunately, could not fall asleep at all: partly because of the chair and partly due to the worries on his mind. _What will become of us, _he thought._ When the council learns of this?_ The worse thing he could think of was the council forcibly separating them: the very thought pained his hearts.

"Zeno?" a quiet, but familiar voice called out. Zeno looked up to see Rtas in the threshold.

"Commander," Zeno said as he rose from the chair and joined Rtas in the hallway.

"How is he?" Rtas asked.

"His physical injuries are minor and will heal quickly," Zeno replied, keeping his voice down for Sani's sake. "Mentally thoughâ€¦I do not know."

Rtas nodded, getting the message. "Here," he said, holding out Zeno's ambassador helmet. "You forgot this back at the scene."

Zeno sighed heavily as he accepted it. "Thanks, Commander. Though, to be honest, I am not sure how much longer I will be allowed to wear this."

"Mmmâ€¦so you recognize the gravity of what you have doneâ€¦."

"How could I not?" Zeno turned and looked into Sani's room. "I was no Sangheili thenâ€¦I was an animal." With another sigh he added. "Though, I admit I do not regret the damage I dealt to that bastard, for we both know the council is not likely to do anything to him for his crimes."

"Perhaps not for the assault on Sani," Rtas agreed, regret in his tone. "However, he is still in trouble for disobeying my orders and stealing that stealth armor."

"Not to mention forging a letter to lure Sani into his trap," Zeno grumbled. "But how much time would that get him? Not nearly as much as he deserves I fearâ€¦."

"I am more worried about you right now, Zeno," Rtas said. "And Sani."

"Yeahâ€¦the council will have a field day when they find out about this: I know they have been itching for a chance to get rid of me."

"Technically they could have replaced you at any time," Rtas muttered.

"I know, which means they want to humiliate and shame me before they cut me loose. Bastards."

"You are a strong Sangheili, Zeno: I know you can take whatever the council throws at you. Sani on the other handâ€¦."

Zeno was silent as he watched Sani sleep peacefully for a few moments. "What do you think they will do with him, commander?" he asked softly. "A Sangheili from any other keep would likely be culled for weakness due to things like this. He needs me, now more than everâ€¦but if the council forces us apartâ€¦." The statement did not need to be finished, for the meaning was obvious.

He looked back at Rtas, whom looked to be in deep thought. "There is a possibilityâ€¦," Rtas said guardedly. "That he may be eligible for

separation due to this trauma. I can look into this, though I am not sure who would have jurisdiction over him to process such documentation."

Zeno mulled this over. "I can find that out. Sani did tell me that he never wanted to be in the military in the first place, so I doubt he would be against it. Worse caseâ€¦if they do force us apart, we can least send him back to his keep, where his family and friends can support him." Zeno clenched a fist over his chest, where he felt that ache in his hearts again. "Though I worry how well we would be able to handle the separationâ€¦|."

"One thing at a time," Rtas told him. "Let us find out all our options first. Who knows, the council may surprise us by siding with us."

"Humph," Zeno snorted. "The human's have a phrase for such a thing."

"And that would be?"

"When hell freezes over."

19. High Council

**Authors Note: **Sorry for the tardiness, but at least it is still Friday ;). Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 18: High Council

The next few days Zeno spent tending to Sani, while at the same time fighting constant worry and anxiety over what the High Council might do. He screwed up and now the High Council likely had the ammo they need to remove him from his station. Zeno tried to convince himself that perhaps losing the title of ambassador would be a good thing. After all, he originally wanted to be stationed here to run from his past: a past that he had since reconciled with and started a new relationship with Sani. However, the uncertainty of what the High Council might do not only to him, but Sani as well, made such convincing difficult at best.

Speaking of Sani, Zeno knew last few days had been trying on him as well. He was having nightmares again and clung to Zeno a lot. Sex, for obvious reasons, was out of the question and would continue to be so for some time from the way things were going. It was a good thing Zeno was not the type that needed sex every dayâ€¦|.

Besides that, work had been thankfully light. What work there had been Zeno could do on his own, though Sani hated being separated from him. Off-duty time was spent trying to rebuild Sani's confidence, though it was slow going. Zeno hoped the High Council did not demand a hearing where Sani would be required to testify, as he doubted Sani would be able to handle it. Unfortunately, he would not get his

wish.

One day, Zeno answered the door to see Rtas standing in front of him. "Commander," Zeno said, his tone slightly guarded. "Can I help you?"

"The High Council is having a hearing tomorrow, first thing in the morning in the courtroom," Rtas said, his tone regretful. "You are both required to attend."

"What about?"

"What do you think?" Rtas gave him a 'that's a stupid question' look.

Zeno sighed, realizing that it was, indeed, a stupid question to ask. "Is the Council even going to give me a chance to explain?"

"I do not know, but I do know this: do not expect the Arbiter to be much help."

"None expected, commander, considering he is out numbered."

"It is not just that," Rtas said. "While he sympathizes with _why_ you did this, he dislikes the fact you allowed yourself to go out of control like that."

"So basically the whole Council is going to be against me," Zeno groaned, though he wasn't _that_ surprised by it. "Why bother with a hearing at all? Do they want us there just to give us a long winded lecture before they throw the book at me?"

"I only know as much as you do at this point, Zeno, though I highly doubt you will get out of this unscathed." Rtas sighed before adding. "If it is any comfort, I will be present as well, though I do not know how much help I will be."

"I appreciate the thought, commander," Zeno said softly. "And thank you, for the notice."

"I will see you tomorrow, then. Good night."

"What is going on?" Zeno heard Sani ask as he closed the door.

"We have been summoned to a hearing first thing in the morning," Zeno explained. "With the High Council."

Sani immediately stiffened at the news. "W-will I need to testify?" he asked.

"I do not know: not even Rtas knows." Zeno pulled Sani into an embrace. "We will just have to wait and seeâ€|."

"I hope notâ€|," Sani muttered. "Iâ€|I do not think I can handle itâ€|."

"I know, Saniâ€|I knowâ€|."

* * *

><p>The next dayâ€|

Sani looked down at his helmet, really not wanting to put it on. Hell, he really didn't want to leave the security of this suite. He had no choice though, for if he did not show that would be used against him; worse, be used against Zeno. So, with a sigh, he slipped the helmet onto his head.

"Are you ready, Sani?" Zeno asked, his voice sounding guarded. He didn't sound eager to go to this hearing either and who could blame him? Between them, Zeno had the most at stake here.

"No," Sani admitted. "But I probably never would be if I had a choice in the matterâ€|."

He heard a faint rumble in Zeno's throat and saw the sympathy in his eyes. "We will make it through this," Zeno said softly as he nuzzled him, Sani managing a faint smile. "One way or another."

"I hope soâ€|."

Zeno gave him a hug before saying. "Come, we best get going: we do not want to be late."

They walked to the courtroom in silence, but holding hands. They had figured there was no point in masking their relationship anymore, as by now the full extent of it would be clear to everyone on the station and beyond. Besides, Sani felt more sure of himself while Zeno was touching him.

When they arrived at the courtroom, Sani saw that Rtas was waiting for them outside. They nodded at each other and the Shipmaster went inside, but before he and Zeno followed, Zeno let go of his hand. Sani felt a brief stab of panic and whined audibly, not wanting lost contact with him. Zeno looked at him with an apologetic expression before putting an arm around his shoulders as they went in.

The courtroom was one of few rooms Sani had yet to see, but it was also one he had hoped he would never see. Regardless, he was a bit awestruck by how large it was: Sangheili physiology was obviously kept in mind when it was reconstructed after the war. In front of them was a tall podium where a judge normally sat, but right now there were five holoprojectors set in front of it, currently inactive. In front of those was a smaller projector, where Sesai was currently manifesting. On either side of the entryway were rows of seats and in front of those were two long tables. He and Zeno were directed to sit behind one of these tables by Rtas, whom sat down next to them afterward.

Behind the other table, Sani saw Runi, whom was cuffed and had a number of bandages on him: likely to try to garner sympathy. He had a guard standing beside him, but what worried Sani were the other two Sangheili that were sitting with him. One was the Ultra that Zeno struck that one day and the other was former Second Master Ruro 'Comew. Zeno noticed them as well.

"Looks like those two are hoping to get a piece of me, so to speak," Zeno grumbled.

"Ruro is likely here to testify his side," Rtas said quietly. "As for

the other one, I do not know what he is here for."

"I punched him in the face," Zeno said. "After he got in my face one day after interrupting a quiet moment between Sani and me."

Rtas sighed and shook his head. "You really need to learn to keep your temper in check on certain things, Zeno."

"You think I do not know that? It is harder to do than youâ€|."

"Attention, attendees," Sesai announced. "The hearing is about to begin. Please remain silent unless you are asked to speak." Behind her the five holoprojectors activated and within moments the holographic forms of the five High Councilors appeared.

Besides the Arbiter, Sani had never seen any member of the High Council before, but he knew their names: Amon 'Anusm, Krom 'Zenar, Gane 'Baran, and Visi 'Sagah. They all looked awe-inspiring, but also frightfully intimidating. A couple of them were glaring pointedly at Zeno, whom was glaring back at them definitely, while two others had an expression that was a mix of disgust and annoyance: only the Arbiter had a carefully neutral expression on his face. The room was dead silent for a couple of minutes before one of the councilors, the Arbiter, finally spoke.

-This hearing is now in session,- the Arbiter said. _â€"The agenda of this hearing are the cases against Minor Domo Runi 'Gotern, Ambassador Zeno 'Ribal and Minor Domo Ruro 'Comew.-_

Sani was sure his name was going to be mentioned, but was pleasantly surprised when it was not. That didn't mean he was out of the woods though. On the other side of the room, Ruro seemed rather surprised that _he_ was mentioned.

"What!" Ruro cried, rising to his feet. "I thought I was here just to testify againstâ€|."

-Silence!- the Arbiter boomed. _â€"You will not speak unless asked to.-_ Ruro quickly snapped his mandibles shut. _â€"Fellow councilmen, we have three cases to deal with today: which shall we handle first?-_

-Considering how intertwined these cases are, I would suggest dealing with the easiest case first,- one of the Councilor's, Visi, replied. _â€"The one dealing with Mister Loudmouth.-_ The councilor looked in Ruro's direction, whom shrank away.

The other Councilors nodded in agreement, so the Arbiter continued. _â€"Ruro 'Comew, recently you were found to be overly zealous in your duties and to have blatant disregard of proper protocols in regards to a desertion. Is that correct?-_

"Yes, Arbiter," Ruro said. "But I feel thatâ€|"

-Your opinion on the matter is not important,- Councilor Amon interrupted him. _â€"Your punishment was approved by Imperial Admiral __Grul 'Gorar himself and we the Council, agreed with this.-_

"Then whyâ€|."

You were brought here today in regards to the additional charge of enabling the theft of a stealth harness. Councilor Visi said.
â€œNot even a day after you were demoted.

Originally, your demotion was only to be temporary, Councilor Gane added. _â€œTo remind you of your place and the protocols you needed to follow: you would have been given your zealot status back after a month. However, it has become clear to this council that you only care about power and, in the case of Zeno 'Ribal and Sani 'Hilvum, vengeance. Therefore, not only will you remain a Minor Domo and be forced to climb back up the ranks the hard way, but you will be reassigned to one of our penitentiaries, since you seem to like treating your subordinates like prisoners._

Ruro opened his mouth in dumb shock. He looked like he was going to say something, but smartly just closed his mouth and nodded in acceptance. His part of the hearing done, he was escorted out of the room.

Now, Runi 'Gotern, Runi, who looked like he not been paying much attention to the proceedings, snapped his head up in attention. _â€œThe charges against you are many: theft, disorderly conduct, insubordination, assault, wrongful imprisonment, forgery and kidnapping. Not the behavior of someone we would want in our military. I wonder how you were allowed to join in the first place._

It is my understanding, Council Gane, the Arbiter said. _â€œThat he was one of many that were drafted into service due to the Schism. Sani 'Hilvum, is also a draftee._

Harumph, that explains a lot of the trouble with those two, Councilor Amon snorted. _â€œLess than ideal blood._

"Noble Council," Rtas interjected, rising to his feet. "If I may."

Permission to speak is granted, Shipmaster Rtas 'Vadum. the Arbiter said, nodding respectfully toward him.

"Despite his troubles, Sani 'Hilvum is a fine soldier and would have gone far if circumstances have been different. I regret I could not do more for him and I wish I had transferred to a more suitable environment before things had escalated to this point. Runi, on the other handâ€¦," Rtas tone now had a faint growl. "While he is skilled on the battlefield, he has been little more than trouble when off it. Zeno and the departed Miko's antics, while annoying, did not leave physical scars." Sani noticed Rtas scratch his belly lightly when he said that and winced at the memory of that particular day.

"If I was to be given a choice right now," Rtas continued. "Of choosing between Sani and Runi: I would take Sani any day."

Your statement has accepted and noted, Councilor Krom said. _â€œIt is clear that Runi's continued service in the military would be detrimental to unit cohesion. However, looking at his records, I noticed an oddity I feel should be clarified before we decide his fate. â€œ_

"What oddity is that, Councilor Krom?"

-It states in his records that he joined from the State of Hilvum, yet it is obvious he is not of Hilvum blood, not to mention he bares the Gotern name.-

The Councilors looked at Runi, whom lowered his head and didn't seem too willing to answer. Sani realized that he and Zeno were the only other ones in the room that knew the answer. Taking a deep breath, Sani rose to address the council. "I-I can answer that, Noble Council," he said, trying hard to keep his voice steady.

All members of the Council immediately looked his way and he had to fight to keep himself from cowering. _"Please do then, Sani.- _the Arbiter said. _-Since it seems Runi himself is not cooperating.-_

"Before we were drafted, Runi had been living at my keep for about a year," Sani explained. "And he was living with us because we saved his life."

-How so?-

"We found him in one of the grazing fields, unconscious and ill-equipped to the climate our keep resides in. He had no Mark of exile, or any other kind of Mark, on him and he never told us why he left his keep. Yet on the same token, his keep did not come looking for him: no _hashin_ were hunting him, or other kind of notices were posted asking about his whereabouts."

_-Well now,- _Councilor Visi said, a curious tone in his voice. _"That answers one question, but leaves another in its wake. One I think all present would be interested in hearing the answer too.-_ At that point, everyone looked at Runi. _"Runi 'Gotern, why did you leave you keep?-_

Runi looked at him and then around the room, his eyes wide in fear. He refused to rise from his chair to answer, so his guard forced him to his feet. In response, he tried to step back, only to nearly trip over that same chair, shaking his head. While it was not rare for someone to leave one's keep to live in another, it was not common either and usually had a good reason behind it: Runi's reluctance suggested it was _not_ a good reason and the council's patience was wearing thin.

_-Runi 'Gotern,- _the Arbiter barked. _"Answer the question! That is an order!-_

Runi squeaked and recoiled at the Arbiter's harsh tone: Sani almost felt sorry for himalmost. For a moment more he hesitated, tears of what Sani assumed to be of fear welling up in his eyes. Then, at least, he breathed a deep sigh and said: "I killed someone."

-I fail to understand,- Councilor Amon said. _"Sangheili die all the time at each other's hands, especially in training.-_

"It was not during training," Runi said, his hands clenched.

-Then?-

"Iâ€¦I was trying to protect someone, someone I held dear. Another Sangheili, Kago was his name, was threatening his life. We got into a fight while in the foundry andâ€¦." Runi shuddered at what he said next. "I ended up pushing him into a vat of molten metalâ€¦I did not mean to kill himâ€¦just stop him from hurting my friend."

An accident then. I do not see why your keep would not have understood the circumstances.

"If it had been anyone else they may haveâ€¦but Kagoâ€¦not only was he in next in line to become Forgemaster of the foundry, but he was highly admired in the keep and had a lot of clout. When I realized what I had doneâ€¦I panicked and ranâ€¦ran as far as I could until I could run no more. It was only after I was found by the Hilvums that I realized what a terrible mistake I had made by running like a coward: the one I was trying to protectâ€¦." Runi closed his eyes, fresh tears streaming down his face. "He was accused of the murderâ€¦and was executedâ€¦executed for the crime _I_ committed."

His tone was of regret and guilt, but that did little to numb the disgust that rose in Sani's hearts. This man that he once saved from certain death and considered a friend was a filthy coward that caused the death of an innocent man. He could not imagine the feeling of betrayal and hurt Runi's 'friend' went through and whatever sympathy Sani had left for him was gone. Completely gone.

"If I had known this when I found you," Sani growled lowly. "I would have left you in that field to die and have your bones picked clean by the _ka'ur_!"

"Says someone who ran away himself," Runi retorted, bitterly.

"_My_ cowardice did not cause the death of an innocent man!"

Enough! Council Gane said. _â€œThis new information does not change the punishment we were considering. If anything, it adds credence to the necessity of it._ The councilor nodded toward the Arbiter.

Runi 'Gotern, the Arbiter said. _You will be discharged from the military and returned to your keep: I am certain they will be quite interested to know about all your shameful activities and punish you accordingly._

Runi's eyes widened, but then closed as he lowered his head and sat down, seemingly resigned to his fate. He looked so pitiful, but Sani felt no pity for him anymore: not after all that he put him through and certainly not after what he had just learned. _It is over, it is finally, truly, over,_ he told himself, shaking his head to clear his mind. _After this hearing is done, I will never have to look upon that man again._

A realization dawned on him: Zeno had been quiet ever since the hearing started. Looking up at him, he was relieved that Zeno had not fallen asleep and was paying full attention. At least he seemed to be: his eyes did not look to be focused on anything, like he was in constant deep thought. Sani quickly realized what he had to be doing:

he was reading himself for the last part of the hearing.

The case against Zeno.

20. Surprise Gift

Authors Note: Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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Chapter 19: Surprise Gift

So far, the hearing had been positive in Zeno's opinion: Ruro's additional punishment was pleasant surprise. In regards to Runi, while that the man had committed a crime prior to his enlistment was a bit of a shock, Sani's reaction to it shocked him even more. Not that he was angry at Runi, but that there was still some fight left in Sani after what he had been through. It gave Zeno hope that Sani would fully recover.

Now though, it was his turn to be judged by the High Council. Zeno had spent most of the hearing thus far mentally preparing himself for anything he could think of that the Council would throw at him. Chances were though that he had not thought of everything, and it did not help that Zeno noted the smirking expressions on most of the council's faces: it was plain that they intended to enjoy this. He quietly decided to deny them that enjoyment if he could, but to try not to do anything that would make things worse for him and Sani. It was not going to be easy though.

"And now for the last item of the hearing," the Arbiter said. "The case against Ambassador Zeno 'Ribal, whom is accused of two counts of assault, attempted murder, blatant public display of affection, unbecoming conduct for his station, abusing the powers of his station, public intoxication and insubordination."

"A rather 'interesting' set of charges," Councilor Amon said. "Many of them shameful and disgusting. Makes me regret electing you to that position. What say you?"

Zeno rose to feet, his gaze focused solely on the council in front of him. "I do not deny most of those charges, noble council," he said. "I know I have taken things some things too far and allowed myself to get out of control." He narrowed his eyes as he added. "But I do not regret doing what I can to help Sani when no one else could or would, nor do I regret the ass beating I gave Runi."

"So you regret punching me in the face when I pointed out your wrongs and the disgusting display you were putting on?" the Ultra asked.

"I only regret not simply telling you to get lost and to leave Sani and me alone, not what I was doing with Sani."

"You vile, disgusting."

Enough,- the Arbiter said. _"It is well known that Zeno is a semo and that in and of itself, is not a crime._

There is, however, a time and place for such things,- Councilor Krom said. _"You knew it was inappropriate to conduct such acts in public._

"If we were doing that in, say, the cafeteria, you would have a point, Councilor," Zeno countered. "However, Sani and I were in a recreational lounge at that time, out of view of highly traveled walkways. While still technically in 'public', we were somewhat secluded. He!" Zeno gestured toward the Ultra. "Would have had to do more than just a casual glance around to spot us."

"I can confirm that there are several locations within the recreational lounges that offer some measure of privacy for couples," Sesai said.

Which suggests you had to go somewhat out of your way to spot them,- the Arbiter said. _"Why were you being so nosy?_

"I believe he has a vendetta against me due to an earlier encounter, Arbiter," Zeno explained. "The day after Sani first arrived he was making a move to kill Sani. An action I prevented."

"And you were keeping me from doing what any other Sangheili would have done!" the ultra growled.

"Are you so sure?" Zeno said, rising an eye ridge. "We are under human jurisdiction here, which means we are obligated to follow human regulations. Killing another Sangheili outright is against regulation here, not to mention the humans hate cleaning up the mess afterward."

Which is correct,- the Arbiter confirmed. _"You were out of line in that situation._

"It would seem so!," the ultra conceded with a low growl and sat down.

But this does not excuse the display of deviant behavior to begin with! Councilor Amon growled.

"Semo acts are not considered 'deviant behavior' by humanity as a whole," Zeno pointed out.

But we are not 'human', Ambassador, which is another problem we have with you.

Indeed,- Councilor Gane said. _"All this time you have spent with humans has changed you: you seem to have forgotten what it is to be Sangheili._

"Strange!," Zeno said scratching a mandible, his tone slightly mocking. "It was my familiarity with human customs and culture that caused you to promote me to this station to begin with."

Yes, but now you have become TOO familiar,- Councilor Amon said. _"You have practically 'become' human!_

"So?" Zeno said defiantly. "It makes it easier for humans to work with me, to relate with me."

The point, Ambassador,- Councilor Krom said. _"Is that by acting human, you no longer accurately represent our people.-_

Not only that,- Councilor Amon continued. _"But the very fact that your lifestyle has become public knowledge has many keeps on edge. They do not like one of 'your' kind representing us. Yes, being a semo is not a crime, but nor is it acceptable. Until recently, we have been able to reassure the populous that you would not flaunt your deviant lifestyle, but no more.-_

Indeed,- Councilor Visi agreed. _"In fact we suspect this deviant lifestyle of yours is the reason you kept losing control of your emotions as of late.-_

"And it is obvious to me, councilors," Zeno growled, fighting to keep his temper in check. "That, with the exception of the Arbiter, none of you have ever been in love before. Until you do and someone threatens your loved one, you cannot know how hard it can be to control one's self."

He has a point, my fellow councilmen,- the Arbiter said softly. _"I have tasted such rage before, though at the time, the one responsible was not within easy reach.-_

"As have I," Rtas admitted. "Though to a lesser extent."

"Love bah," the ultra grumbled. "Such a useless emotion: it causes nothing but trouble and weakness."

There were several growls heard, though Zeno could not pinpoint all of those that emitted one due to growling himself. The other councilors seemed to shift uncomfortably, apparently uncertain on how to respond to the current topic. Then, an unexpected voice spoke up behind Zeno.

"Noble Council, I know this is a Sangheili affair and I have no right to be here, but I have something to say that you may want to know."

Luke! Zeno thought as he turned his head to look behind him. Sure enough, it was Luke standing behind him a couple of rows back. _When did he sneak in?_

There were a couple of low growls of annoyance from the council. _"Who are you, human?-_ Councilor Visi asked.

"Lieutenant Luke McGuire, of the Office of Naval Intelligence." Luke replied.

I doubt whatever it is you have to say will sway this council, human,- Councilor Amon growled. _"But for amusements sake, go ahead.-_

If Luke was insulted by the comment, he didn't show it. "Noble Council, I have known the ambassador since he was assigned to ONI's

orbital station towards the end of the war. He has changed from a grumpy, reluctant and human-hating man to a sympathetic, light-hearted and understanding one. You may not approve of semos, but you have not seen the change in Zeno's character ever since Sani first arrived on this station. Prior to Sani's arrival, Zeno suffered from frequent mood swings. These mood swings ranged from prankster prone behavior to severe depression that resulted in bouts of drinking and increased aggression." Luke let that set in a moment before continuing.

"After Sani arrived, especially when their relationship took off, Zeno's behavior greatly improved. His depression was gone, his aggression during certain human holidays ceased, the pranks have all but stopped and he has been, overall, much happier. He has become a better, more productive individual since his relationship started, semo or otherwise. If you cannot see the value in that, thenâ€|wellâ€|I guess you are heartless old fools."

Zeno had to clench his mandibles tightly to keep a snicker from being heard at Luke's jab at the council _Well spoken, my friend,_ he thought, looking up at the council. It was hard to tell, but the Arbiter looked like he had a slight smirk on his face. As for the rest of the council, they all looked like they were about to burst in rage.

Who are you to judge us, human!- Councilor Amon roared. _â€"You know nothing about our customs!-_

"I know more than you think, thanks to Zeno," Luke said curtly. "And many of those customs would be considered 'outdated' and 'barbaric' to us. However, I am not here to debate who has the better morals and customs here, so I will just say a simple statement many of my kind try to live by and that I think applies here."

And what silly statement would 'that' be?-

"'You have no right to judge, unless you have walked a mile in the other person's shoes'."

_I do not understand,- _Council Visi said. _ -Why would I try to wear your shoes?-_

"It is a metaphor, Councilor," Luke explained while Zeno again had to suppress a snicker. "It means that unless you have experienced what other person has, you cannot accurately judge that person due to the lack of that kind of experience. For instance, if you have not been in love, you cannot know the actions love motivates or the reasons behind those actions."

But knowing what everyone has experienced is impossible!- Councilor Krom protested.

"Indeed, but that does not mean you cannot try to understand it from the other person's point of view. That is what many of our juror's have to do in our own court cases, so they can give the most accurate verdict. It's only the reasonable and fair thing to do."

The council grumbled and shifted, again looking uncomfortable. Several minutes passed with no one saying a word. Then the council started to mutter amongst themselves, their voices too low to hear.

After several more minutes of this, the Arbiter finally spoke clearly.

__It has appeared we have come to an impasse,- __ he said. _â€"We cannot come to a unanimous agreement on your fate today, Ambassador. However, we will continue to discuss this matter on our own. In the meantime, you will continue to perform your duties as normal, though I would highly suggest you mind your actions from this point on, lest they be used against you. Understood?-_

"Understood, Arbiter," Zeno said.

__Then this hearing is officially adjourned.-__

* * *

><p>A couple of months laterâ€|.

The single sun was starting to set, sending beams of light dancing through the forest trees. Sani watched this every day, fascinated by how alien, yet beautiful it looked. The smell of the trees and songs of the local fauna were also pleasing and relaxing. This was especially so when it rained, but he really loved it when they came here during winter: he had never seen such big fluffy snowflakes before. Unfortunately, it was now spring here, so the time of snow had passed.

Regardless, Earth was no Sanghelios, but it had its own share of beauty and wonder. He could see why Zeno came here as often as he could, away from civilization and prying eyes. The cabin they stayed in was on the edge of a national forest, so there were few humans here besides the park rangers that patrolled the few roads and their neighbor, Leon Steele: a grumpy military vet that didn't like their kind but left them alone, until recently that is.

Sani reached up and rubbed the still healing wound on his shoulder. He and Zeno were ambushed while taking a walk in the forest a few days ago by a group of, what did Leon call them? Militias? Regardless, he was struck in the shoulder, only a graze really, but enough to tell them that it was intentional, especially when more shots were fired. Zeno had managed pull him behind a large rock before any more injuries were inflicted, but they were pinned down. Leon had came by and drove the rogue humans off before leading them back to the cabin.

They reported the incident to the rangers, but hadn't heard anything else. Zeno had asked why Leon helped them and was told that while he didn't like them, he didn't want another war started up because of those idiots. Sani could understand that: neither species were really in good shape right now to start another war with anyone.

Still, the incident got Sani thinking. It bothered him that they had yet to hear from the High Council about Zeno's position. The silence screamed that they were up to no good: for all he knew, those militias could have been hired by them to take him and Zeno out. Paranoid thinking, yes, but he knew Zeno was wondering it as well.

The other thing that was bothering him was their relationship. It was missing something, something Sani knew what it was but was afraid of

it at the same time. Once he tried to recall what it was like to have sex with Zeno, only for Runi's face to fill his mind, discouraging him from thinking about it again. Sani feared their relationship was going stagnant because of his fear and worse, it was becoming evident that Zeno was hiding something from him.

Lately he had been traveling to a small tourist town that was about ten miles away from the cabin, alone. Zeno would only tell him he was going there to get food for the cabin, but Sani's gut was telling him something else was going on while he was down there. Was Zeno seeing someone else? Was he getting tired of him because he did not want to have sex? He did not want to believe it, but there was no evidence saying otherwise.

"Honey! I'm home!" Zeno's cheerful voice called out, breaking Sani from his thoughts.

His hearts soared at the sound of his voice, but that feeling faded quickly when he remembered his suspicions. He did not want to lose Zeno to anyone and he realized what he had to do to prove to Zeno that he was still worth it. With a heavy sigh he stepped back inside from the back porch and headed for the living room.

Zeno was just beyond the living room in the kitchen, unpacking groceries. "Ah, there you are, sweet," Zeno said cheerfully. "I got enough to last us for the rest of our stay here this round, unless you go on a cooking binge again that is."

Sani managed a chuckle. Yes, he had taken up cooking as means of coping with the stress of his ordeal with Runi. The problem was though, that he often ended up using all the food in the residence when he had one of his 'fits' and while he was proving to be a good cook, there was no way the two of them could eat everything. They ended up having to give away a lot of it so it didn't go to waste.

"Does that mean you will not go back to town alone anymore?" Sani asked as he helped him put the food away.

"Should not need to, until we come here again," Zeno replied. "Is something wrong, sweet? You sound like you have something on your mind."

Sani paused and then hugged him gently, discreetly sniffing him as he did so. He did not smell another Sangehili on him and Zeno's return embrace was as warm and gentle as ever. Was he wrong? "Iâ€|," Sani started, feeling anxious. "I want to have sex with you tonightâ€|"

This caught Zeno by surprise. "Are you sure you are ready for it again?" he asked softly.

"No, butâ€|." Sani clenched the fabric of Zeno's clothing. "I feel I need to."

"Why?"

"I just _do_!"

"Alright," Zeno said softly, Sani feeling the warm caress of his

tongue licking his forehead. "As before though, if you feel you cannot handle it, let me know OK?"

Sani numbly nodded.

* * *

><p>Laterâ€|

He did manage. It was hard at first due to being so tense, but eventually Sani was able to relax and enjoy it. Sani sighed blissfully, so happy to have beaten back his fear to do this, but did he accomplish what he set out to do?

"Now," he heard Zeno said softly as they lay cuddled up in bed. "I admit I am curious: what brought this up all of a sudden?"

Sani gulped and hesitated, as it was becoming more and more clear that he was mistaken in Zeno's recent actions. "I wanted to prove to you that I am still worth itâ€|," he finally blurted out.

"Saniâ€|." He felt Zeno cup his head with his hand and lift his face so he was looking at him. "All I have to do is look at you to know that you are worth it."

With that, tears started to form in his eyes, guilt filling his hearts. "Then whyâ€|," he sobbed. "Why have you been so secretive lately? Why do you keep going to town alone without me?"

Realization lit up in Zeno's eyes as he apparently figured out what was bothering him. "Oh Sani," he said as he hugged him tightly. "I am so sorry about worrying you. I would never cheat on you, for you are my one and only."

"Thenâ€|?" Sani left the unspoken question hanging.

Zeno sighed and rose out of the bed. Sani watched him as he walked over to his discarded clothing and sorted through them before pulling something out. He didn't get a good look at it, as it was wrapped in some kind of tissue paper.

"I was hoping to get a chance to figure out how best to do this butâ€|," Zeno said as he returned to the bed, but instead of climbing back in, he knelt beside it in front of him. "Forgive me if I sound like a blubbering idiot."

"Why would youâ€|," Sani started to ask but his question as stopped in mid-sentence when Zeno unwrapped the item and his eyes went wide in shock.

The item was a pendant made of polished silver set on a sterling silver chain. The pendant itself consisted of two large crescents that overlapping each other, with two smaller crescents tucked under the point of the lower part of each larger one, their tips touching the other larger one. Sani knew what this was: the symbol of union, and as a result, knew what Zeno was about to ask.

"But thisâ€|thisâ€|," Sani stuttered, trying to find the right words. "This is only forâ€|."

"Under _human_ law we can," Zeno said. "I do not give a damn what the High Council will think of this."

"Iâ€¦I seeâ€¦".

"Soâ€¦uhâ€¦". Zeno blushed as he struggled to form the proper words. Finally he held out the pendant toward him and asked softly in a sincere voice: "Saniâ€¦will you marry me?"

Sani smiled, for there was really only one answer he could give.

"Yes."

~ Fin

* * *

><p>AN: *_Untold Truths_, the last of the series, I will start posting either this Saturday or Sunday. :) That one will be posted weekly.

End
file.